The Impact of Relationship Marketing Strategy on Customer Retention in a Business-to-Business Services Company.

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Strategic Marketing

BUSA 7076A: Research Report

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ABSTRACT

Relationships are by nature two-sided, and both parties share the responsibility of the outcome. The antecedent state and the outcome may differ according to the perspective. This research focuses on understanding relationship marketing from the perspective of service industry businesses' employees who interface with the customer. Relationship marketing theory suggests that successful relationship marketing strategy is a result of co-operative relationships with the customer, and its effectiveness is positively related to social and functional benefits. Trust and commitment are foundational in this theory; for this reason the variables investigated in this study are: trust, commitment, communication, and bonding, and their impact on relationship satisfaction. The influence of employee moderating factors, competency and responsiveness, on relationship satisfaction was also investigated. This construct was then proposed to affect customer retention.

The research method utilised was a survey with a structured questionnaire, using convenience sampling of employees in an organisation. A total of 183 responses were received, comprising employees working across all levels in the company who interface with the customer. Structural equation modelling was then used to analyse the data.

The results showed that trust and bonding were significantly influencing factors on relationship satisfaction, while commitment and communication were not significant. The employee moderating factors of competency and responsiveness were also found to be not significant in influencing relationship satisfaction. In turn, relationship satisfaction was found to be significantly positively influencing customer retention.

Recommendations are given to organisations to strengthen their relationship marketing, particularly the employees interfacing with the customers, and directions for future research.

DECLARATION

I, Mashudu Lembede, declare that this research report is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Strategic Marketing at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

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Mashudu Lembede

Signed at ……………………………………….

On the ……… day of ………. 2020

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context of the study

Research contribution related to relationship marketing in business-to-business (B2B) services industry has been evolving, facilitated by the maturing of services marketing and recognition of its importance to both the company and the customer, as well as technological advancement (Cortez & Johnston, 2017). Relationships are by nature two-sided and both parties share the responsibility and outcome. According to Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer (2010), relationship marketing can be defined as the directing of all marketing activities towards the establishment, development, and the maintenance of successful relationship exchanges with the business stakeholders. Morgan and Hunt (1994) define relationship marketing as the process of attracting and applying marketing activities to the development and retention of customer relationships. The key social factors identified for relational exchange are: trust, commitment and communication (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Relationship marketing effectiveness is varied, depending on the specific relationship strategy that the company chooses to follow, as well as the context of the relational exchange (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). It is in the company's best interest to improve the understanding of the primary drivers for relationship effectiveness. Companies that have invested in relationship marketing strategy also gain a critical understanding of customers' needs and are then able to improve their customer service. Those companies that have invested in establishing a nurturing environment have the potential to cultivate reliable customers, which results in customer retention, giving the company a competitive edge. According to Gartner_Inc (2019), 20% of the current customer base produce 80% of the company's future revenue, therefore managing these customers with a long-term view is key to ensure the future financial success of the business.

The antecedents and outcomes of the relationship marketing strategy differ according to the perspective at which it is being approached. This research focuses on all the company employees that interface with the customer in a B2B services organisation. According to Sharma, Niedrich, and Dobbins (1999), human interaction is the most important component of the customer interface that contributes the greatest effect on customer satisfaction. The quality of the interactions has an effect on customer satisfaction and inclination to purchase (Kim & Kumar, 2018). Understanding the relationships between the employees that interface with the customers has been a subject of interest not only because of the relationship quality factor, but also because these employees tend to apply a personalised customer service to the customer, and they are hence the best spokespersons for the customer (Dalela, Givan, Vivek, and Banerji (2018).

Services companies are solution-driven and technical competence is most often central to the service offering. The credibility of the service delivery is of the utmost importance (Zolkiewski & Lewis, 2003). The delivery of a service is usually an interactive experience with the company employee and the customer both integral to the completion of the task. The customer's positive or negative response is a result of the interaction (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). An assessment of the employees' interaction with the customer gives valuable insight that may be used in strategic planning and quality improvement. With this knowledge, management can systematically focus their efforts and resources to improve the interaction quality, thereby improve the response and the promptness. In order to understand the impacting factors, all the departments, from marketing, business development teams and post-purchase customer support, must be allowed to voice their experience.

Companies that are active in emerging market countries such as South Africa operate in a competitive globalized marketplace (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006). As such, the organisation needs to develop enduring profitable relationships between all business stakeholders to gain a competitive advantage, and differentiate its marketing network to create a unique selling point (Keller & Kotler, 2016). According to Payne, Christopher, Peck, and Clark (1998), when compared to the developed economies, emerging markets are characterised by: relatively lower skills level, lower standard of education – with illiteracy remaining a factor within the populations, lower standard of living, poor economic wealth, and lower industrial development (Payne et al., 1998). Companies are exposed to tough local economic challenges such as slow economic growth, high inflation rate, and a competitive local and foreign market economy (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006).

An operational business today faces numerous challenges due to the dynamic and competitive nature of the marketplace. The customer base has become highly diversified and is increasingly more demanding (Barnes, Fox, & Morris, 2004). Therefore companies face a steep challenge of attracting new customers while retaining their current customer base. To stand out from their rivals, companies must maintain a loyal customer base (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010). One of the MSI 2018-2020 research priorities is to understand “the most effective strategies to drive deeper and lasting customer engagement with the firm” (MSI 2018-2020 Research Priorities, 2018), and to prioritise customer knowledge as one of the most important drivers of business success (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The African B2B market perspective represents rapid growth, according to the Lions on the Move II: Realising the Potential of Africa’s Economies report, McKinsey Global Institute (2016), and the B2B sector is a greater spender compared to the consumer market. According to the report, African companies in 2015 spent $2.6 trillion of which 40 percent is from South Africa and Nigeria, with spending set to grow to $3.5 trillion by the year 2025. Spending allocation is 50 percent on materials, 16 percent is on capital goods and the remainder is on various services such as business, financial services, transportation and telecommunications. At a growth rate of 3.5 percent per year, the services sector is one of the most rapid to grow, therefore it is worth researching. Figure 1 below indicates spending by African companies (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016).

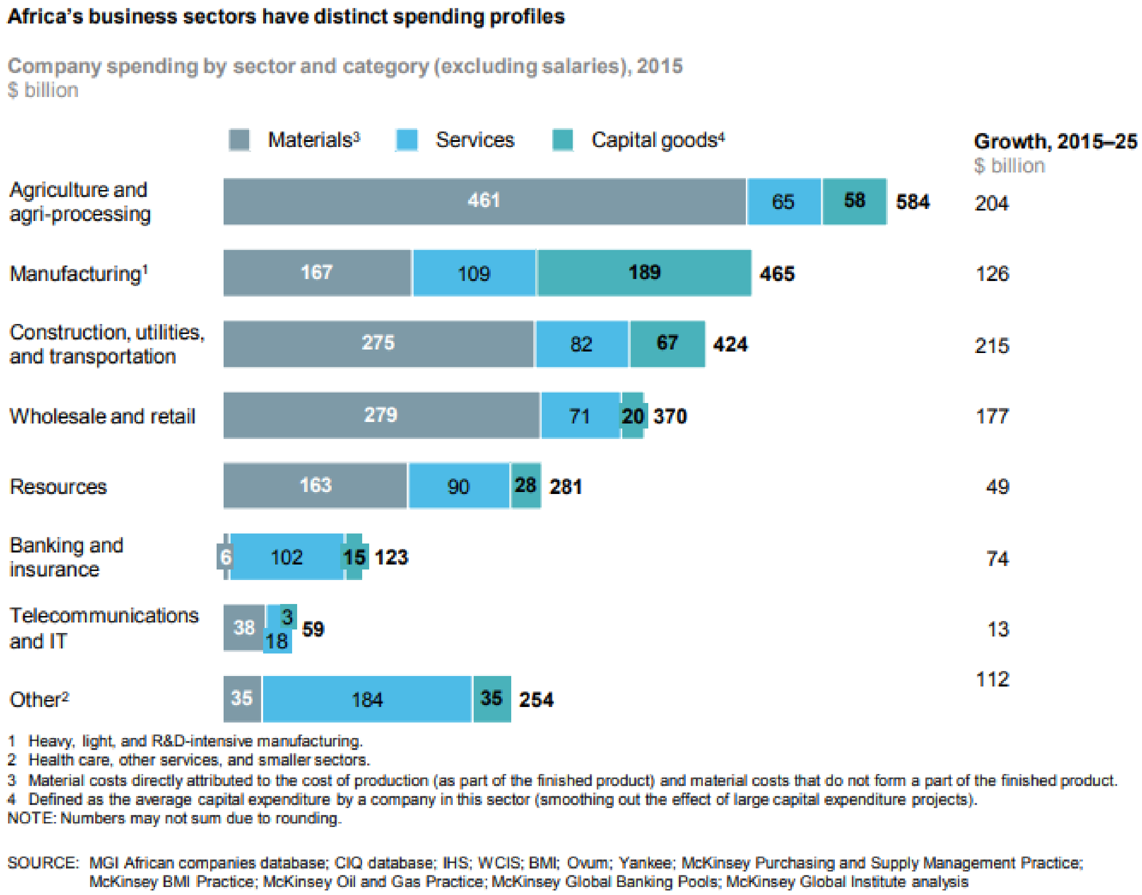

Figure 1 : Africa's business spending profile (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016)

This research is conducted in a South African business to business industry, in services companies. A study by Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) on relational benefits in the services industry, noted that implications of relationship marketing may differ in B2B as compared to B2C, as relationships are established in formal agreements and contracts. Various members of decision-making units are involved in the purchasing decisions. It is, however, predicted that where personal contact is prevalent, social and special treatment benefits remain relevant (Gwinner et al., 1998). The research follows the social and economic determinants of relational drivers of relationship marketing, building upon prior research such as by Roberts-Lombard, Mpinganjira, and Svensson (2017), which investigated the relationship between relational constructs: trust, commitment, satisfaction, co-ordination, co-operation and continuity in a South African B2B environment. With empirical evidence, the study of Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017), has given an expansive overview of the interplay of the relational drivers from the customer's perspective.

The study by Heirati, Henneberg, Richter, and Harste (2019), emphasises that factors may vary from the service provider's point of view (Heirati et al., 2019). There is a gap in the literature, which is the lack of focus in the B2B services industry from the South African perspective; hence this study applies prior knowledge of relationship marketing constructs interaction, from the point of view of the company providing the service.

1.2 Overview of the Current Environment

The 21st century B2B customer is well-informed about the services and/or products in the market before the decision to purchase. According to the DemandGen 2012 Report, 23% of B2B customers enquire directly with the service provider, while 77% of customers do not immediately contact the salesperson for enquiry, but first conduct independent online research (DemandGen, 2012). In B2C, technology has facilitated a huge improvement in the consumers' experience which has influenced the B2B buyer to desire similar experience replicated in the B2B marketing world. There is an abundant amount of marketing content available online, featuring solutions, and the client has plenty of information about the company and its competitors before their decision to purchase. B2B companies cannot rely on the customer's desire to purchase anymore, but they must convince the company's decision-makers that their products and services will yield the best return on investment than the competitors. The decision to purchase from a specific company is based on loyalty linked to the belief that the selected services provider the best value (Gwinner et al., 1998). Therefore, it is crucial for company employees, especially those in direct contact with the client to understand their role in customer relationship satisfaction and how their product/services are adding value to the customer's business.

B2B offerings are often similar, and differentiation difficult, as offerings are often commoditized (Pine, 2015). Unique offerings are short-lived in this highly competitive market. Often this leads to clients buying from suppliers they trust. According to Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017), there has not been any other empirical research regarding the interrelatedness of relationship constructs in the B2B South

African context. Most research conducted in this field has been in the developed countries (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017). The study conducted by Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017) looked at the interrelation between relationship marketing variables in a South African business perspective. Trust, commitment, satisfaction, coordination, cooperation and continuity are focus areas, while highlighting that trust and commitment are the key variables for relationship developing strategies. The research has successfully given insight to emerging markets' organisations, on the relationship marketing variables to be integrated in the establishment of relationship marketing strategies. They can serve as a guide for the organisation, for focusing resources on these variables, and to improve relationship satisfaction (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017).

This study expands on the relationship developing constructs in the South Africa context. Within the larger background of relationship marketing research, trust and commitment are two highly interrelated theories, with commitment described as a behaviour indicative of trusting relationships, which stimulates a relational bond between the seller and buyer (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987); (Morgan & Hunt, 1994); (De Ruyter, Moorman, & Lemmink, 2001). Empirical evidence from research conducted in non-western industry business, with a focus on China, supports the theory that commitment is related to trust, and that communication quality, conflict and similarity are related constructs of relationship marketing in industrial business marketing (Coote, Forrest, & Tam, 2003). This study therefore identifies the following variables: trust and commitment as acknowledged by Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017), and communication and bonding as acknowledged by Coote et al. (2003), as influential factors to relationship satisfaction, and consequent influencers of the establishment of long-term relationship with competency and responsiveness as moderating factors.

1.3 Research Problem and Objectives

1.3.1 *Problem Definition*

Relationship marketing development in B2B has been shown to effect the organisation's customer orientation and understanding of the customers' needs (Payne el al., 1998; Gummerus, von Koskull, & Kowalkowski, 2017; Grönroos et al., 2017). There are many studies that focus on its significance and implication: Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Zolkiewski (2017). However, according to Palmatier et al. (2006) few of them have gone on to identify the setting within the company at which relationship marketing strategies is being applied, with reference to customer retention, how it is measured and the value for the customer (Palmatier et al., 2006).

Empirical research by Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017) has provided an insight to guide emerging market businesses about the different relationship marketing constructs to be included when developing relationship-building strategies. To develop on these findings, this research investigates the interface between differing employees with the customer within the B2B environment to determine the interrelatedness of the constructs, and the impact that relationship-oriented employees have on relationship satisfaction and whether this has influenced customer retention. With growing competition within the B2B marketing environment, the company to customer strategy must show significant return on investment and clear customer focus to achieve a quality relationship at all areas of interface with the customer.

1.3.2 *Problem Statement*

The research problem is to determine the impact that relationship marketing strategy development has on customer retention with focus on those employees who serve as an interface with the customers in a B2B services company in South Africa.

1.3.3 *Aims and Objectives*

The research aims to evaluate relational factors of the company employee that are in contact with the customer. Managing customers for value through relationship marketing focuses on company's employees who are at the interface with the client as critical moments in the customer journey before and after purchasing (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018). The research assesses the employees' application of relationship satisfaction with the key social and functional relational exchange factors: trust, commitment and communication (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

The research objectives are the following:

1. To identify the determinants of the relationship between the company employees that interface with the customers and the customers' perception of the service delivered.
2. To determine the effectiveness of these employees' moderating factors on the customers' perception of the service delivered.
3. To analyse the importance of marketing relationship interactions by these employees on customer retention.

The company's employees are a strategic tool, through their ability to deliver a functional and quality service to the customer. This builds the company's ability to maintain a strong competitive edge and thereby not only gain new customers, but retain current customers. Arnott, Wilson, Doney, Barry, and Abratt (2007) note the limited availability of research related to building sustainable and trusting relationships within the B2B services setting. Companies could benefit from understanding how building a trusting relationship with the customer can lead to promoting other relational outcomes, such as long term sustainable relationships and positive word of mouth (Arnott et al., 2007).

1.4 **Significance of the study**

The significance of the study is to give an understanding of the varying level of contribution that each contact point has to the relationship strategy that has been implemented in a B2B market and customer retention. Furthermore, to identify the common characteristics of a successful relationship marketing program for employees that are in contact with the customer, and to facilitate further discussions about interactive relationships amongst the variables; trust mentioned by Morgan and Hunt (1994), commitment as stated by Coote et al. (2003); customer satisfaction, mentioned by Zahorik and Rust (1993) and Ndubisi and Nataraajan (2016). The existing literature does not provide comprehensive understanding of these relationships from the perspective of the employees, and there is scarce literature from the South African perspective. Therefore, this research gives new evidence beyond the current themes.

The behavioural aspects of B2B marketing have been attributed to a businessman, John Winamaker, a successful retail pioneer whose business philosophy supported an integrated and harmonious mutual business relationships between stakeholders and customer satisfaction (Tadajewski, 2008). Later research contribution was ignorant of this input but interrelated, such as by: Achrol and Kotler (1999), LaPlaca (1997), LaPlaca and Katrichis (2009), and Dwyer et al. (1987). These focused on the paradigm shift from transactional exchanges to relationship focused exchanges (LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009). Whilst customer relationships have been subject to extensive studies over the last few decades, most of these studies focused on the customer's perspective, and few studies have examined relationships from the employees' view. None of the previous studies identified have focused on Africa or South Africa. No research has been identified that has focused on the understanding of relationship marketing constructs by identifying the interrelatedness between the relationship constructs, and the impact this has on relationship satisfaction. This research contributes to the gap in the literature because it builds on the study of Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017) by examining those constructs that have been identified as being the most impactful to relationship marketing from a South African perspective, with specific input by the South African employees (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017). The research is useful in that construct interrelatedness will contribute to determining the most strategic way to successfully implement relationship marketing internally, which will result in an improved interaction with the client and subsequently customer retention.

1.5 Delimitations of the study

- The study was only conducted in B2B services companies located within South Africa.
- The study did not distinguish between different services industries in which the businesses operate, which may have an impact.
- The job position level of the research participants was inclusive from junior roles to top level managers who have had any experience of interaction with the customer.

1.6 Definition of terms

Relationship marketing: Palmatier et al. (2006) define relationship marketing (RM) as the process of identifying, developing, maintaining, and terminating relational exchanges with the purpose of enhancing performance for the company.

B2B services industry: Zimmerman and Blythe (2013) define B2B companies as businesses that buy a product or service for the use in the production of other products and services that are sold, rented or supplied to others. These are customers that buy on behalf of an organization as opposed to personal use.

Customer retention: Reichheld and Sasser (1990) define customer retention as the activities undertaken by the company to reduce the rate of defection.

Company Employee: In the context of this research the term refers to any individual who provides direct services to customers for the company, including and not limited to those working in marketing, sales, customer services, management, front desk and back office.

1.7 Assumptions

The following assumptions have been made regarding the study:

- The sample of B2B employees in contact with the client have the knowledge to provide insight into the critical factors.
- This study assumed that the respondents are employed by companies with an ongoing practice to develop relationship marketing as part of the marketing strategy.
- The study assumed that the total number of respondents was sufficient to gain adequate data.
- The study assumed that responses from respondents are without bias and are truthful.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews previous academic literature on the key subjects of this study. The literature review forms a vital part of the research process and makes a valuable contribution to the research (Booth, Colomb, Colomb, Williams, & Williams, 2003). The key concepts include, trust, commitment, communication, bonding, relationship satisfaction, and customer retention. This section aims to build a theoretical framework to guide the empirical investigations.

The literature on relationship marketing suggests that a business that is focused on establishing relationships with the customers has positioned itself for a steady supply of customers (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017). It is the development of strong customer-buyer relationships that contributes to business success and improves the customer's repeat purchase intentions. According to Frow and Payne (2009), relationship marketing must emphasise identification of the relevant stakeholders, segments and sub-groups, understanding the relational forms within the network and how they interact, and strategically managing the relationships to maximise long-term shareholder's value (Frow & Payne, 2009).

Co-operation between customer and client is an important factor for successful relational exchange and therefore successful relationship marketing strategy (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010). According to Arnett and Badrinarayanan (2005), it has been demonstrated over time that of the numerous factors influencing relationship marketing success, three main factors are the most important and have been consistent; these are trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994); (Dwyer et al., 1987), relationship commitment (Anderson & Weitz, 1992), and communication (Mohr, Fisher, & Nevin, 1996).

The determinants of trust within the organisation are the customer orientation, social interaction and open communication, and may result in customers having loyal intentions toward the company (Arnott et al., 2007). Furthermore, the concept of social behaviour as an antecedent of trust is important, in that it consists of a strategically designed message to communicate to the customer as to how the service will be delivered (B. Mittal, 2000). In addition to the three most important factors of relationship building, there has to be a mutual sense of belonging to the relationship, and bonding is an essential factor in ensuring buyer and seller personal commitment to maintain the relationship (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010).

The literature review is structured as follows: Firstly, a background discussion of the topic reviews the customer retention objectives of businesses in services industries in the 21st century. This is followed by a review of the relational fundamentals that encompasses the conceptual model; these are: trust, commitment, communication, bonding and relationship satisfaction. The relational moderators to be investigated, i.e. competency and responsiveness, are also discussed, as well as the influence they have on the quality of the relationship between the customer and the employee and the subsequent link to customer retention in B2B services environment (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010).

2.2 **Background Discussion**

One of a business's main objectives is to foster repeat purchase thereby cultivating customer loyalty, as well as to attract new customers, but to avoid or reduce the rate of defection (Berry, 1995). It has been proven over the years by both academics and practitioners that it is more expensive to attract new customers than it is to retain existing customers (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, & Hansen, 2009); (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). By focusing marketing resources on current customers, through relationship marketing and managing relationships, the business is able to expand relationships and reduce customer defections (Gustafsson, Johnson, & Roos, 2005). The task is to operate with the view for long term sustainable relationships with customers based on mutual trust and benefits. Consequently managers have to employ innovative strategies to remain relevant and effective for the customer (Palmatier et al., 2006). The functional quality input of the employee in the organization is crucial to its success in the quest to provide greater value for the client (Kanibir & Nart, 2012).

Services companies must develop an understanding of the customers' needs and set specific targets on how to achieve their standard of delivery. A study by Walter, Hölzle, and Ritter (2002) provides empirical evidence that the degree with which the company can achieve its functional requirements influences whether the customer can trust the company. The company employees are responsible for the action required to meet the functional targets. For this reason, this study focuses on competency as a moderating factor of the relational variable.

To solidify these relationships B2B companies must have rapid response times, usually this is guided by strict agreements according to the contract. B2B services companies must respond to their clients quickly, and their employees have been bought in on this by tying these key performance indicators (KPIs) to how much they earn. There is empirical evidence linking responsiveness and trust, according to Gummerus, Liljander, Pura, and Van Riel (2004) – "a quick response to requests is likely to increase perceived convenience and diminish uncertainty, and is an important way for companies to show that they are customer-oriented and act benevolently toward customers. Therefore, it affects trust" (p.183).

As B2B businesses embrace and develop relationship marketing strategies within their customer interface, the ability to measure relationship marketing productivity influenced by marketing activities within the firm is integral to improving the interaction between the employee and the B2B client. Understanding the employee's action when interacting with the customer allows the measure of competency, it allows the company to optimize its marketing costs and benefits the client (Izakova & Kapustina, 2018). Relationship marketing aspects such as cooperation, creation, mutual adaptation and experience of the contributors are principal in relationship development (Zolkiewski & Lewis, 2003). According to Homburg, Jozić, and Kuehnl (2017), focusing on these areas provides insightful information to improve employee's capabilities, thereby improving the development of long-term relationships with the company (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018).

2.3 **Conceptual Background**

2.3.1 *Trust*

The literature provides strong empirical support that social interactions may lead to building of trust (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990); (Morgan & Hunt, 1994); (Kramer, 1999). By establishing trust between company and client, both will learn that the joint accomplishment surpasses pursuing their goals individually (Anderson & Narus, 1990). Trust is the confidence that the partner has two consistent elements: honesty, competency and compassion, and that the partner will act in a manner that ensures its needs will be fulfilled in the future by actions undertaken today (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010). Researchers have shown that trust can have behavioural intent, which requires a willingness to participate and therefore confidence in the outcome, exposing the company to vulnerability (Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993) (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) (Kramer, 1999). The technical complexity of B2B services offerings and the value of the transactions of the services may be intangible, therefore trust is key to the decision to purchase (Arnott et al., 2007). According to Kramer (1999), long-term orientation between the buyer and the seller's relationship is a function of mutual dependence. Ganesan (1994) proposes that the extent to which organisations trust one another is prompted by the dynamic nature of the environment in which it operates. The development of a long-term orientation requires substantial sacrifices and possibly an increase in specific investments in the relationship, it is therefore important for the organisation to clearly identify the strategy to be undertaken (Ganesan, 1994).

Arnott et al. (2007) propose the following antecedents of trust in global B2B services industries: social, offer-related and cultural antecedents. The antecedents most relevant to this study are social and offer-related:

Social: The strategic nature of social antecedents of trust is pre-emptive and involves strategically designed communication to ensure openness and demonstrate concern with the client (V. Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999). The social factors are characterised by good customer relations which refers to the existence of trust, transparency, positivity and personal contact with customers (Kotler et al., 2009).

Offer-related: Service quality literature suggests the customer requires tangible evidence of the ability to deliver the service (Arnott et al., 2007). The offer-related principles of trust suggest incorporation of functionality (characterised by responsiveness), reliability (characterised by competency) and economic value with regards to the service rendered. When the customer's experience of the service exceeds their expectation, they gain favour and confidence for the supplier. According to Gounaris and Venetis (2002), in B2B services, technical reliability contributes to the trustworthiness, an outcome component of service quality which is a function of how well the service provider has realised their undertaking. The B2B customer uses services delivery as KPIs in the evaluation of service quality and customer service. Empirical evidence shows a positive relationship between the outcome of the service rendered and trust. Expectations that have been met and exceeded nurtures trust, the service provider can be relied upon for future service requirements (Gounaris & Venetis, 2002).

Empirical evidence shows that social behaviour antecedents are dominant over service offering in building trust and have a direct impact on building long-term sustainable customer relationships. According to Arnott et al. (2007), "trust is shown to have a positive influence on key relational outcomes, loyalty commitment and share of purchases," (p.1109).

Customer satisfaction generates a positive word of mouth, which brings new customers. Satisfied customers are more likely to purchase other services within the company since they have experienced the company to be certain of delivery. Ensuring customer satisfaction cannot be overlooked and should be a vital action of the organisation. By examining the relationship interactions between the employee and the client from the employee's perspective, primarily to determine whether direct contact has positively contributed to the building of trust aspects to improve the relationship quality and subsequently relationship satisfaction. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: Trust has a positive impact on relationship satisfaction.

2.3.2 *Commitment*

Relationship commitment is an essential factor in any relationship. The research according to Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggests that commitment is the primary component of which other factors in the development of relationships can be built upon. Relationship commitment has a major influence on the building of long-term customer-seller relationships (Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005). Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (1992) define commitment to be “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship with a partner” (p. 316). Other factors that make commitment key to relationship marketing are:

- Commitment encourages the company employee to work at preserving the relationship, by cooperating with the customer.
- Commitment encourages the company employee to adopt a long-term relational approach with the customer.
- Commitment gives the business contact personnel the courage to be prudent in their decisions regarding the exchange partner as there is reciprocity by the customer.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) definition of commitment is “an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely” (p. 23).

According to Grönroos (2017), the management of the interaction process with the customer must be included in the marketing process, and this requires the business’ commitment. Factors such as understanding the client’s processes and resources, financial standing, and sales processes influence the success of relationship marketing strategy as the company begins to understand its customers’ business and commercial processes. The company is also equipped support the customer, the customer interface personnel are empowered and may tailor a more value add oriented offer and become more customer-focused (Grönroos, 2017). According to Bendapudi and Berry (1997), two types of relationship commitment that drive loyalty intention are identified, which are:

i. Affective commitment: created through personal interaction, reciprocity, and trust.

ii. Calculative commitment: created through switching costs (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997)

The theory of Bendapudi and Berry (1997) links up with the theory of Arnett and Badrinarayanan (2005) with regards to relational outcomes of trust: loyalty commitment (allegiance, social bonds with customer contact points) and share of purchases i.e. service providers are better off achieving a higher share of the customer's business to spread the costs over a higher returns (Arnott et al., 2007).

Empirical studies by Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017) have established that a positive outcome of the relationship building process is a factor of trust, with commitment to the customer eventually developing. Both trust and commitment are the essential basic elements of the customer's satisfaction with the service provider. This has a favourable effect on the service provider, who is perceived as reliable, trusted and working to secure a favourable future for both parties, as opposed to only motivated by self-profitability (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017). Both parties are confident in a collaborative future caring for each other's interest with a minimised chance of abandoning the relationship. Relationship quality affects share of purchase (Johnson and Grayson (2005), and it has been shown how trust influences the success of the sale (Arnott et al., 2007). This leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: Commitment has a positive impact on relationship satisfaction.

2.3.3 *Communication*

Communication is an antecedent of trust, a key aspect of relationship marketing, and is critical to the customer-seller relationship for sharing expectations and adjusting for successes and failures over time (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and (Murphy

& Sashi, 2018). Empirical evidence according to Anderson and Narus (1990) and Morgan and Hunt (1994), indicates that the level of trust between customer-seller improves with communication. Communication as defined by Anderson and Narus (1990) is regarded as the formal and non-formal sharing of information between businesses in a timely manner. According to (Murphy & Sashi, 2018), in B2B services industries, communication is a driver of relationship satisfaction whose role is unmatched. Even if the project/service delivery to the client fails, a communication strategy implemented correctly can still have a positive outcome to customer satisfaction (Murphy & Sashi, 2018).

Communication is an important tool for resolving differences between customer-seller (Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005). According to Mohr et al. (1996), collaborative communication is a relationship building attributes that can boost relational elements (Mohr et al., 1996). Researchers Hung and Lin (2013) show empirically the decrease in the negative impact of a relationship conflict as a result of improved communication (Hung & Lin, 2013). It is important that the appropriate form of communication tools are used by contact points personnel to ensure a satisfactory process and outcome of communication (Murphy & Sashi, 2018).

According to Arnett and Badrinarayanan (2005), a positive link exists between the responsiveness by the customer interface personnel and trust; Dagger, Danaher, and Gibbs (2009) also suggest that the strength of the relationship is increased by the frequency of the contact. Customers have shown a positive attitude towards more responsive suppliers, this interaction results in relationship satisfaction (Murphy & Sashi, 2018) and (Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005). This leads to the third hypothesis:

H3: Communication has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction.

2.3.4 *Bonding*

Social bonding involves personal interactivity, it is the closeness that develops between the company employees and the customer. Bonding is an essential facilitator of customer retention as stronger personal bonds lead to greater commitment to maintain the relationship. Bonding is that relational variable that builds business relations between the customer and the employee resulting in interdependency (Rodriquez & Wilson, 1999). This results in the commitment to work together towards a common goal (Stanko, Bonner, & Calantone, 2007). A study by Rodriquez and Wilson (1999) has proven bonding to be an antecedent of trust and commitment of a business relationship, eventually building toward interdependency. Business partners need to trust each other to be able to invest resources into the relationship, building trust develops cognitive and emotional ties. This has significances in that the company employee as an idividual and the company's structural attachments with the customer, will counter any emerging pressure that may appear to dissolve the relationship (Rodriquez & Wilson, 1999).

According to Gounaris and Venetis (2002), two types of bonding have been identified: structural and social. Structural bonds are a result of economic exchange, they are strategic in nature and may be defined by agreements, whereas social bonds are built through personal assurances as a result of interpersonal exchanges, and may extend from business to close personal connection. The study provides empirical evidence that offering a superior service quality to the customer, together with efficient bonding has resulted in affective commitment with customer (Gounaris & Venetis, 2002).

In business to business services industry, product/service quality and interaction quality are proven to be the main drivers of customer satisfaction (Aichner & Gruber, 2017). The competency level of the employees to deliver a quality service therefore affect customer satisfaction. Competency has a role in the development of long-term relationship and intention to invest further into the relationship, which promotes customer retention (Zahorik & Rust, 1993). The competence to respond to the customer is a factor in delivering a satisfactory service, which improves relationship satisfaction, for example, a timely response to a request by the customer is likely to increase perceived convenience and reduce uncertainty (Aichner & Gruber, 2017). There is a lack of focus on empirical evidence, especially around the efforts made to bond with the customer by the company's employees and the role bonding has to facilitating lasting relationships with the customer. According to Rodriquez and

Wilson (1999), research should be conducted with a focus on facilitating intercultural interaction within strategic alliances. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Bonding has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction.

2.3.5 *Customer retention*

Customer satisfaction and customer retention are critical to the profitability of the business in today's business world. Customer retention refers to the extent to which the business is able to maintain a relationship with the current business' existing customers (Hansemark & Albinsson, 2004). As business develops strategies for both customer satisfaction and customer retention, according Hansemark and Albinsson (2004), the employees of the business may start to regard the two as their primary role in the company. When the employees of the company interact with the customer, it is always a potential risk to customer satisfaction and retention, according to Potter-Brotman (1994), and for this reason the employees should be equipped with the skills to respond efficiently (Hansemark & Albinsson, 2004).

According to Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler (2002), relationship quality is a function of many constructs which together indicate the status of relationships between the company and the client. The key integrated components of relationship quality are: satisfaction with the service provider's performance, trust, and the commitment to the relationship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Service quality is subsequently an assessment of the company's service performance by the client based on previous involvement with the company (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002); (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Confidence and trust have a positive impact on interactions between services employee and the client, as with greater confidence, the client will have less anxiety about the purchase and therefore greater satisfaction (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002).

There is limited literature with regards to the company employees' influence in customer satisfaction and retention in services industries, and yet it is the outcome of this interaction that determines the likelihood of the customer being satisfied with the service (Hansemark & Albinsson, 2004). Customer satisfaction is interlinked with customer retention; customer satisfaction increases the ability of the business to retain customers. In most businesses, customer satisfaction is the key performance indicator for evaluating the relationship quality between the customer and the business (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). According to Hansemark and Albinsson (2004), customer satisfaction is the ability to meet the customers' expectations with the product or services rendered, in so doing influencing the attitude that the customer may have towards a service provider.

Repeat purchasing is critical to building loyalty intentions and customer satisfaction plays a role in this aspect (Hoang, 2015). Not all the business customers in services industry are satisfied customers, sometimes the customer has no alternative but to stay with the service provider because of limited or highly specialised services requirements. According to Crosby et al. (1990), service quality is an essential condition of relationship quality and complements the buyer-seller relationship. The business's commitment is to create the best service to achieve long-term sustainable relationships with the customer, which if satisfactory for the customer will lead to relationship satisfaction (Hansemark & Albinsson, 2004). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H5: There is a positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and customer retention.

2.3.6 *Competency*

The customer's perception of the quality of the service is priority for B2B services (Schneider, 1998). To retain customers and stay competitive, companies have to highlight the role of the service employees' expertise to increase the customer's trust in the company's ability to deliver a satisfactory service (Gounaris & Venetis, 2002). The B2B services company must focus on the service employee efforts and competencies on delivering service quality, which in turn yields positive experiences for customers as well as customer's perception of the service quality (Gummerus, Liljander, Pura, & Van Riel, 2004). The influence of the employee's competency as a moderating factor of relationship satisfaction is a contributing factor of customer retention. Trust is the confidence that the partner has two consistent elements: honesty, competency and compassion, and that the partner will act in a manner that ensures its needs will be fulfilled in the future by actions undertaken today (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010).

According to Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer (2010), empirical evidence indicate a significant interaction between competence and relationship satisfaction, results reinforce the idea that competence intervenes as a moderator variable that enhances the impact of customer on relationship satisfaction. The relational moderator is investigated as a moderating factor of the quality of the relationship between the customer and the employee and the subsequent link to customer retention in B2B services environment (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010).

2.3.7 *Responsiveness*

There is empirical evidence linking responsiveness and trust, according to Gummerus, Liljander, Pura, and Van Riel (2004) suggests that rapid response is influential in increasing perceived customer orientation by the customer. It increases confidence and assurance of the company's employees' ability to deliver the service by reinforcing trust (Gummerus, et al., 2004).

According to Arnott et al. (2007), the offer-related principles of trust suggest incorporation of functionality such as responsiveness to the service rendered (Arnott et al., 2007). There is a positive link between the responsiveness by the customer interface personnel and trust; Dagger et al. (2009) also suggest that the strength of the relationship is increased by the frequency of the contact.

Perceived timeliness is a customer's perceived efficiency in responding to customers' needs. Responsiveness has been described as factor in the customer's perception of the service quality (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry 1990). Responsiveness is also a contributing variable in communication with the customer, the amount and frequency, and quality of information shared between the supplier and the customer are a reflection of the status of the relationship (Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin 1996). Responsiveness is investigated as moderating factor of the quality of the relationship between the customer and the company's employee.

2.4 Conclusion of the Literature Review

Relationship marketing is a considered decision by the organisation to internally orientate towards building long-term relationships with customers. The literature illustrates the importance of trust, commitment and communication as important constructs of relationship marketing. Relationship marketing encompasses the entire organisation as the company value chain. The proposed conceptual model on Figure 2 below encompasses the theory based on previous research.

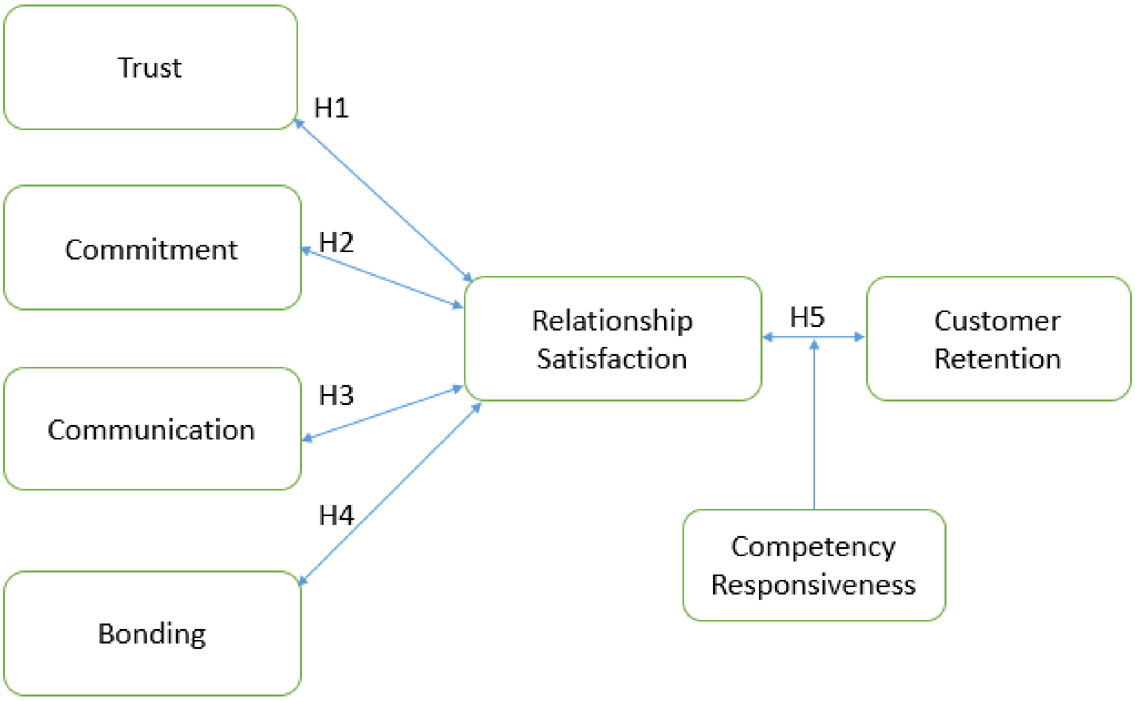

Figure 2: The Research Model

Adapted from: Morgan and Hunt (1994); Verhoef (2003); Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer (2010); Ieva and Ziliani (2018) and Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017)

The model above summarises the research agenda. In the model above, customer retention is the outcome of relationship satisfaction with the customer, taking into consideration all the variables. The assumption is that employees' competency and responsiveness are moderators of relationship satisfaction and customer retention (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef, 2003; Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010; Ieva & Ziliani, 2018; and Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017).

3 METHODOLOGY

Following the literature review and identification of the conceptual framework in chapter 2, this section of the report outlines the research methodology that was applied to conduct the research for this study. This chapter addresses specific objectives with regards to the research design, sampling, data collection procedures, survey instrument development, and measurement of the study constructs. The chapter also addresses the potential limitations of the research procedure and methods as well as the reliability and validity measures applied.

A research is done when information is collected to answer questions for solving a problem (Booth et al., 2003). Research has been defined by Kothari (2004) as the scientific and systematic search for relevant information applying various methods and techniques to understand the scientific data. The objective methodology and techniques were used (Kothari, 2004).

3.1 Research approach / paradigm

According to Levitt et al. (2018), the research paradigm/approach is defined as the explicit assumptions that researchers make use of to enlighten the method, a detailed plan of how a researcher has gone about answering their research questions. These assumptions are defined as the researchers' paradigm, the approach used to test theories by investigating relationships between variables (Creswell, 1996). There are two types of research approaches, these are qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative method is useful for developing theories and hypotheses. It is also useful for understanding the development of a group of constructs for research purpose. According to Bryman (2016) qualitative method describes a set of approaches that are words providing insight including experiences and interactions in the form of natural language and expressions. By inferences, a pattern is determined and associated with the occurrence of the subject to develop a sense of an understanding of the subject (Levitt et al., 2018).

Quantitative research method, the measure of quantity, structured and statistical, was used for this research (Kothari, 2004). This was to establish the prevalence and strength of variables indicative of the employee-customer interface use of relationship marketing strategy. A quantitative research approach has been used in similar studies, i.e. Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017); Oly Ndubisi (2007); Theron and Terblanche (2010); Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) and Ieva and Ziliani (2018). Quantitative is dependent on a large number of interviews to achieve a measurement, with regards to this research to make substantial assertion on the state of relationship marketing for South African B2B companies (Yilmaz, 2013). An online self-administered survey questionnaire was constructed for the targeted sample (Appelbaum et al., 2018). The benefits of the quantitative approach for studies similar to this research is the use of specific, standardised procedures of measurement and data collection (Yilmaz, 2013). This study has utilised existing scales that have been used extensively in the study of the constructs of relationship marketing.

3.2 Research design

The main research designs are casual, exploratory and descriptive designs. (Shukla, 2008). The research question under investigation influences the choice of the research design. Qualitative research defined above, aims to gain preliminary insights, refers to a set of selected methods that are used in explanatory research designs. In comparison quantitative research, defined above is commonly associated with marketing surveys and is related to descriptive and casual research designs (Shukla, 2008).

The study aimed to identify factors that influence or best predict an outcome (Creswell, 1996). The methodological approach adopted in this study was casual or explanatory research. Research designs are generally categorised into two types, i.e. cross-sectional, which refers to the collection of information on any given sample of a population only once, and longitudinal which refers to the type of research design that monitors changes over time within a sample of a population (Shukla, 2008). Cross-sectional survey design involves looking at data from a population at one specific point in time. The participants in this type of study are selected based on particular variables of interest and structured questions are used to obtain data from research participants. Empirical research conducted by Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan, and Moorman (2008) confirms that cross sectional data survey is most suitable for casual research which samples educated respondents. It favours examination of concrete and externally oriented constructs and allows the use of a various measurement formats and scales.

Therefore, the design adopted in this research report was a causal, cross-sectional survey design. This was suitable as the effect of independent variables on the outcome was tested (Shukla, 2008). The design of the survey provided the basis for precise estimates of the degree of the relationship between customer retention and relationship satisfaction. This design aimed at finding out the prevalence of the research problems identified in the literature review section (Kumar, 2019).

3.3 Population and sample

3.3.1 *Population*

The population consisted of all employees responsible for delivering a service to the customer. The population for this study comprised all respondents who were professionals with a reasonable amount of experience with customers. The respondents were in an operational and sales and marketing environments working in B2B services companies South Africa, who have been working on their current role for more than 2 months. This was done to ensure the employees had sufficiently established a relationship with the customer.

Companies covered were across board: small medium to large companies that operate within the services industry in B2B in South Africa.

3.3.2 *Sample and sampling method*

According to Marshall (1996), the sample size is determined by the optimum number required to be able to make valid inferences about the population. An optimum sample size reduces the level of sampling errors. The optimum sample size is dependent on the parameters of the phenomenon that is being researched and is influenced by the expected size of differences in outcome between groups that are being investigated (Marshall, 1996).

The sampling method that was used was convenience sampling, a type of non-probability or non-random sampling, whose main objective is based on the convenience of accessibility of the participants (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The sample size targeted was 250: the number of respondents comprising of employees working across all levels in the company from general administration to management employees, provided they have a contact with the customer. The method does not control bias and cannot be considered a representative subset of a population.

Table 1: Positions of the participants

Company	**Positions**
B2B Professional Services Companies: Such as and not limited to technical services, marketing services, engineering services, testing inspections and certification, training services, etc.	Sales/Marketing/Business Developer
	Administration
	Operational
	Technical Support
	Consultants
	Customer Support/ Customer Services
	Support services: e.g. Research & Development; Safety, Health & Quality; IT Specialist; Finance; Auditor; etc.

3.4 **The research instrument**

The research instrument tool is the means by which the research data is collected, and in this study, a structured questionnaire was used for this purpose (Appendix B). According to Kumar (2019), the research tool is either developed or adapted from another already developed from previous research; this research questionnaire was adapted from a similar study by Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017). According to Churchill Jr and Peter (1984), pre-existing scales may enhance validity.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts: Sections A, B and C. Section A is a qualifier question to indicate the industry in which the respondents work. Section B is for questions relating to respondents' demographic information, e.g., age, gender, education and tenure. Section C comprises of the measurement constructs (i.e. the latent variables) with the following items trust, commitment, communication and bonding.

A cover letter to respondents provided information about the objectives of the study is given in Appendix A. The questionnaire used to collect the primary data is given in Appendix B. All the factors in the study were measured with a multi-item measurement scale. Items adapted from previously validated studies were used either precisely to preserve their original meanings or rephrased in an easy-to-understand language. All the references to the hypotheses and the constructs were removed during testing to ensure the respondents should not know what is being measured. This was done to avoid confounding of results.

The questionnaire was based on predetermined, identical and standardised sets of questions (Peterson, 2000). This was adapted from literature researching similar constructs using a seven-point Likert measurement scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. A Likert measurement scale is a psychometric scale commonly used in research that involves questionnaires, and is a widely used methodology in scaling survey research responses (Wuensch, 2005). The questionnaire for demographic data was adopted from the cultural value scale by Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, and Gelfand (1995).

For measuring the constructs, this study was based on previous studies by Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017). All the factors in the study were measured with a multi-item measurement scale. Consequently, trust, commitment, communication and bonding were measured with multiple indicators. Customer retention was hypothesised as a function of the customers' satisfaction with the relationship based on perceptions of the employees (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017).

To measure trust, respondents were asked to comment on six statements, e.g. "We are fair in our negotiations with our customers" and "We stand by our word". The measure was adapted from Anderson and Narus (1990); Dwyer and Oh (1987) and Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017). The measure used a 7-point Likert scale, anchored at “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

To measure commitment, respondents were asked to comment on six statements, e.g. “We would like to continue our work with our long-term customer” and “Our relationship with our long-term customer deserve our maximum effort to maintain”. The measure was adapted from (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017), (Kaufman, Jayachandran, & Rose, 2006), and (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), (Kaufman, Jayachandran, & Rose, 2006), and (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The measure used a 7-point Likert scale, anchored at “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

To measure communication, respondents were asked to comment on six statements, e.g. “We provide the customer with information that helps guide their decisions” and “In our relationship, our customers keep us informed of the major developments in their company”. The measure was adapted from (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). The measure used a 7-point Likert scale, anchored at “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

To measure bonding, respondents were asked to comment on seven statements, e.g. “Our companies benefit from knowledge sharing with our customers” and “We have invested in a personalised relationship with our customers”. The measure was adapted from (Gounaris & Venetis, 2002) and (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). The measure used a 7-point Likert scale, anchored at “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree”.

To measure relationship satisfaction, respondents were asked to comment on seven statements e.g. “Our services meet our customers’ expectations” and the relationship between our customers and us is positive”. These measures were adapted from Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017). The measure used a 7-point Likert scale, anchored at “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

To measure customer retention, respondents were asked to comment on seven statements e.g. “We expect our relationship with the customer to continue for a long time” and “Our relationship with the customer is a long-term alliance”. These measures were adapted from Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017). The measure used a 7-point Likert scale, anchored at “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree”.

To measure views on competency, respondents were asked to comment on four statements e.g. “We are expect in our field” and our clients are satisfied with the level of our competency”. This measure was adapted from Schneider (1998). The measure used a 7-point Likert scale, anchored at “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

To measure views on responsiveness, respondents were asked to comment on four statements e.g. “I provide a timely response on standard requests by the customer” and “I provide a timely response and effective resolution to customer issues”. We are expect in our field” and our clients are satisfied with the level of our competency”. The measure was adapted from Bowman and Narayandas (2004). The measure used a 7-point Likert scale, anchored at “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

Pre-testing in the form of a pilot study was implemented to resolve any fundamental issues in the survey as well as to test for content validity and reliability (Reynolds, Diamantopoulos, & Schlegelmilch, 1993).

3.5 **Procedure for data collection**

The questionnaire was uploaded onto the Qualtrics Survey System, an online assessment system. This was shared with the respondents via an online link. This was done to guarantee respondents’ anonymity and maintain confidentiality. The program ensured data was captured digitally at the same time that the respondent completed the survey, making it easier to conduct the analysis.

Respondents were identified via social media channels such as LinkedIn. The researcher searched on LinkedIn for people that contained elements on their profile that related to B2B services companies with a customer interface. Potential respondents were then sent the link of the survey via direct messaging (DM) on

Linked-in, some were sent the link to the survey via email, texted telephonically as well as via other social media platforms.

3.6 **Data analysis and interpretation**

This research tested the impact of relationship marketing strategy on customer retention and thus the influence employees' competency and responsiveness on relationship satisfaction. The hypotheses were tested by first carrying out exploratory factor analysis. This was conducted to assess the validity of the constructs while Cronbach's Alpha tests were conducted to assess reliability.

Regression analysis adds a higher degree of statistical certainty by looking at individuals' responses, it also benefits the study to identify how much weight different questions have in predicting the outcome. Regression analysis was also used to identify the weight difference in questions when predicting the outcome and precise level of correlation of questions. Any item that has a correlation of 0.6 is believed to have a strong correlation (Draper & Smith, 2014).

SPSS, which is a statistical software, was used to analyse the results of the research study. According to Arkkelin (2014) SPSS is a popular choice among researchers due to its versatility as it allows for different types of data analyses and output. Data analysis was coded into Excel and imported into SPSS, to perform descriptive statistics analysis, and conduct confirmatory factor analysis followed by path modelling.

The hypotheses were further tested by performing a series of path analyses using structural equation modelling (SEM). SEM is a collection of statistical techniques that allow a set of relationships between one or more independent variables, either continuous or discrete, and one or more dependent variables, either continuous or discrete, to be examined. SEM allows questions to be answered that involve multiple regression analyses of factors (Ullman & Bentler, 2003). SEM delivers the correct and efficient estimation method for a sequence of separate multiple regressions, predicted at the same time. SEM is categorised into two factors, the structural model and the measurement model. The measurement model refers to the path model, it links the independent variable to the dependent variable (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). The measurement model is used by researchers to utilize numerous variables for a single independent or dependant variable. SEM is also a method used to represent test and estimate the theoretical network, and has been recommended in studying complex patterns of relationships amongst constructs in a theoretical model (Suhr, 2006).

3.7 Validity and reliability

Validity determines whether the research truly measures the data intended, it measures the truthfulness in the research results (Golafshani, 2003). To ensure the reliability of the data in quantitative research there needs to be an investigation into the trustworthiness is the data, this is crucial to determine if the questions that have been asked are valid for the research (Golafshani, 2003). The primary concern of validity is to ascertain that a test measures what the researcher actually intends to measure. The pilot study was carried out to evaluate validity and reproducibility of the structured questionnaire. While different validity typologies have been distinguished construct validity which includes convergent, discriminant and nomological validity is considered, since both convergent and discriminate validity are easily identified using statistical tools such as factor analysis.

- Convergent validity: Deals with the extent to which the scale correlates positively with other measures of the same construct,
- Discriminant validity: Refers to the extent to which measures does not correlate with other constructs from which they are supposed to differ. It reflects a lack of correlation among differing constructs (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015)
- Scale validity: A usually robust validity when sample size is considerably large.

Reliability, convergent validity and divergent validity were assessed using composite reliability (CR), the average variance extracted (AVE) and maximum shared variance (MSV) respectively. Results were reported in a tabulated form. To test the validity of the study the pilot study of a total of 40 responses was not sufficient as the sample was too small, the rule of thumb is at least 10 responses per construct or at least a sample of 100 responses.

Reliability is the extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study (Golafshani, 2003). The concept represents a measurement of consistency combining instruments measures for specific behaviours and / or performances. The chosen measuring instrument to deliver reliable results because specified individuals are measured constantly under consistent conditions. Internal consistency is a measure of reliability, on the assumption that items on a measurement scale should measure same construct. In order to achieve consistency in the study, the questionnaire and the findings were prepared by the researcher. The respondents completed one medium of survey, in the form of the Qualtrics Survey questionnaire, therefore completed identical scales and questions for each category of propositions being investigated.

The Cronbach's Alpha is the diagnostic measure for reliability coefficient, this has been used to measure the consistency of the complete scale, results are presented in Table 3 (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). The coefficient varies from 0 to 1, with a value of 0.6 or less generally considered unsatisfactory internal consistency reliability, the closer Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1.0 the greater the internal consistency of the items in the scale. An important feature of Cronbach's alpha is that its value tends to increase with an increase in the number of scale items. Hence, multiple items measuring a construct tend to improve the reliability (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).

3.8 Limitations of the study

The study design or measurement scale may not always be the best but one adopts it for a possible number of reasons and such limitations must be disclosed and communicated, otherwise this is unethical (Kumar, 2019). There are two types of limitations, technical and administrative limitations.

Potential limitations have been identified. The most influential limitation was that since the study was conducted on employee, about their activities, the employees could have been biased towards their own behaviour and their own companies.

Other limitations include:

- The study analysed B2B services companies within the South African context, this presents limitations in that the observations cannot be proxy for the rest of the African continent.
- The survey was only open to participants working in the services industry with a tenure of longer than two months.
- Questionnaires' method of collection of data, limited ability to interrogate views, as the researcher was not there when the questionnaire is taken.
- The seven-point graphic rating scale to ascertain respondents agreeing and dis-agreeing with the statement presented on this type of scale has several limitations. The respondents may check at almost any position along the line which fact may increase the difficulty of analysis. The meanings of the terms like "very much" and "somewhat" may depend upon respondent's frame of reference so much so that the statement might be challenged in terms of its equivalency.
- The information may be subject to bias as respondents are not always truthful in their responses, their responses may be a reflection of the desired conduct they wish to present.
- Questionnaires offer researchers valuable methods of evaluating employee views, they are limited in their ability to probe issues in an-in-depth manner such as the importance that employees attach to customer responsiveness (Kothari, 2004).

3.9 Confidentiality and ethics

The data collected for this research report was handled confidentially. No sensitive information such as respondent's names were disclosed. There were no company names disclosed. The questions were directed at experts and professionals with no sensitive questions or topics.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Pilot Study Results

4.1.1 *Pilot Study Results: Reliability Test*

Reliability is defined as the degree of inter-relatedness among a set of items designed to measure a latent variable. The Cronbach's Alpha is the diagnostic measure for the reliability coefficient (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). The coefficient varies from 0 to 1, with a value of 0.6 or less generally considered unsatisfactory internal consistency reliability, the closer Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1.0 the greater the internal consistency of the items in the scale, the results are reported below:

Table 2: Reliability of Pilot Study

Qu	Construct Abbreviation	Construct Question	n	#Items	M	SD	a
Q1	Trust (Trst)	To investigate the relationship between trust and relationship satisfaction.	37	6	6.13	1.062	0.944
Q2	Commitment (Ct)	To investigate the relationship between commitment and customer retention	37	6	6.28	0.843	0.865
Q3	Communication (Cm)	To investigate the relationship between communication and customer retention.	37	6	5.72	0.870	0.802
Q4	Bonding (Bo)	To investigate the relationship between bonding and customer retention	37	7	5.75	0.923	0.824
Q5	Relationship Satisfation (RS)	To measure the employees' views of relationship satisfaction of the client	37	7	5.47	0.959	0.839
Q6	General Relationship (GR)	To measure views on general relationships	37	4	3.96	0.826	0.182
Q7	Customer Retention (CR)	To measure views on customer retention	37	7	5.34	1.310	0.922
Q8	Competency (Comp_1)	To measure views on competency	37	4	6.06	0.826	0.551
Q8	Responsiveness (Resp_1)	To measure views on responsiveness to the customer	37	4	5.82	1.154	0.929

Note: Qu=Question number; n=valid cases; #= number of; M=mean of scale; SD= standard deviation scale, Cronbach Alpha (on standard items)

Trust (Trst) had six questions, all the items tested under the construct Trust were reliable, the total Cronbach Alpha's for Trust is 0.944 which is above the required Cronbach Alpha of 0.65, and this proves that the questions and answers for construct Trust were reliable. Commitment (Ct) had six questions, all the items tested under the construct Commitment were reliable, and the total Cronbach Alpha's for Commitment 0.865 which is above the required Cronbach Alpha of 0.65, and this proves that the questions and answers for the Commitment construct were reliable. Communication (Cm) had six questions, all the items tested under the construct Communication were reliable, and the total Cronbach Alpha's for Communication 0.802 which is above the required Cronbach Alpha of 0.65, and this proves that the questions and answers for the communication construct were reliable. The seven questions and answers tested under construct Bonding (Bo) were reliable, the total Cronbach Alpha's for bonding is 0.824. Relationship Satisfaction (RS) construct also had seven questions and answers that were tested and proven to be reliable. The total Cronbach Alpha's for RS is 0.839. Four questions were asked under General Relationships (GR), with the Cronbach's Alpha scoring at 0.182 which was unacceptable and not reliable. GR items were designed to specifically to result in a low score, even with deleting the items on the question, the Cronbach Alpha would not improve, this done to confirm participants honesty with the response. Customer Retention (CR) had seven questions, all the items tested under the construct CR were reliable, the total Cronbach Alpha's for CR is 0.922 which is above the required Cronbach Alpha of 0.65, and this proves that the questions and answers for construct CR were reliable. Competency (Comp_1) value items resulted on a low score, therefore not reliable, items were not revised to improve the values. Responsiveness (Resp_1) had six questions, all the items tested under the construct Resp_1 were reliable, the total Cronbach Alpha's for Resp_1 is 0.929 which is above the required Cronbach Alpha, and proved to be reliable.

The findings provide a good insight into the relationship between trust, commitment, communication, bonding, relationship satisfaction and customer retention. Although not all items tested were found to be a reliable, the Cronbach Alpha reliability of the questionnaire was considered sufficient.

4.1.2 *Correlation Analysis*

The Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (Spearman's rho) is the appropriate correlation analysis when the variables are measured on a scale that is at least ordinal. The correlations matrix is summarised on the Table 3 below:

	Trst	**Ct**	**Cm**	**Bo**	**RS**	**CR**	**Comp_1**	**Resp_1**
Trust	1							
Commitment	.867**	1						
Communication	.489**	.498**	1					
Bonding	.373*	.449**	.691**	1				
Relationship Satisfaction	.684**	.659**	.680**	.805**	1			
Customer Retention	.660**	.729**	.669**	.760**	.825**	1		
Comp	.503**	.523**	.506**	.368*	.458**	.493**	1	.756**
Resp	.630**	.641**	.701**	.536**	.639**	.727**	.756**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Correlation matrix

Items with (*) means that correlations between those factors are significant. The Pearson's correlation co-efficient shows that there is a significant relationship between most of the constructs.

4.2 FINAL RESEARCH RESULTS

4.2.1 *Data screening*

A total of 282 responses were received. Of the 282 responses, 52 did not qualify to continue with the interview, while 47 had not completed all the questions. These 99 respondents were excluded from further analysis. Thus, the final sample had 183 respondents.

4.3 Sample characteristics / demographic

4.3.1 *Gender*

The gender distribution of the respondents is summarised in Figure 3. It can be noted that more than half of sample were female (56%), the other 38% were male, while 6% did not indicate their gender.

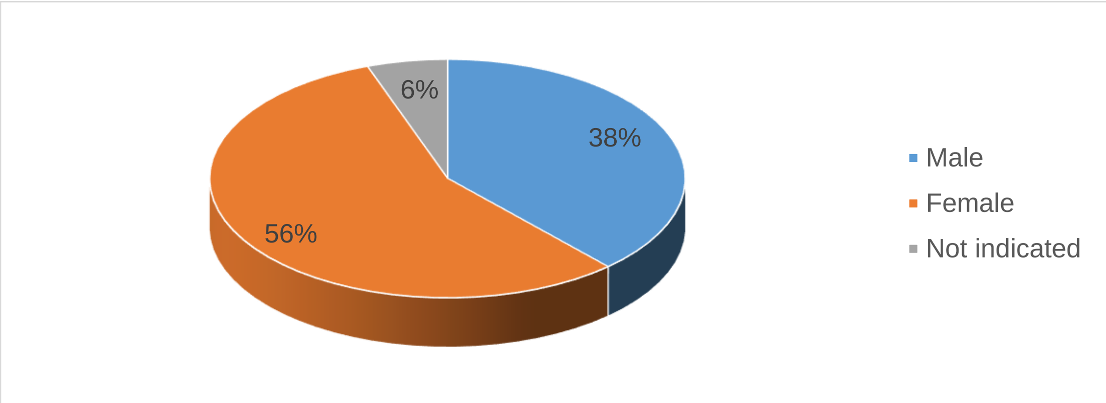

Figure 3: Respondent gender

Figure 3 above shows the age distribution of the respondents. Only 1% of the sample was aged 18 – 24, while 36% were 25 – 34 years old, 44% were 34 – 44 years, 16% were 45 – 54 and 3% were 55 years or older.

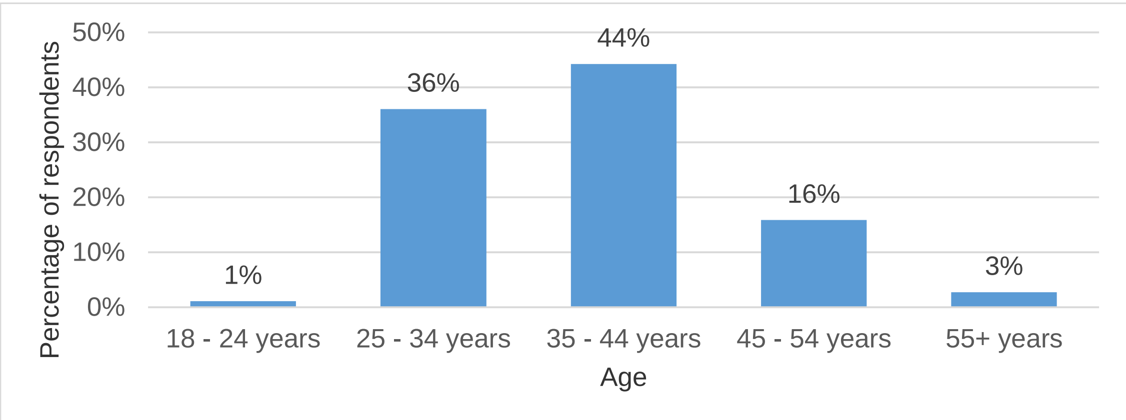

Figure 4: Respondent gender

4.3.2 *Ethnicity*

Most of the respondents were African (70%) followed by White (15%), Indian (8%), Coloured (4%) and other (2%). These results are illustrated in figure 5.

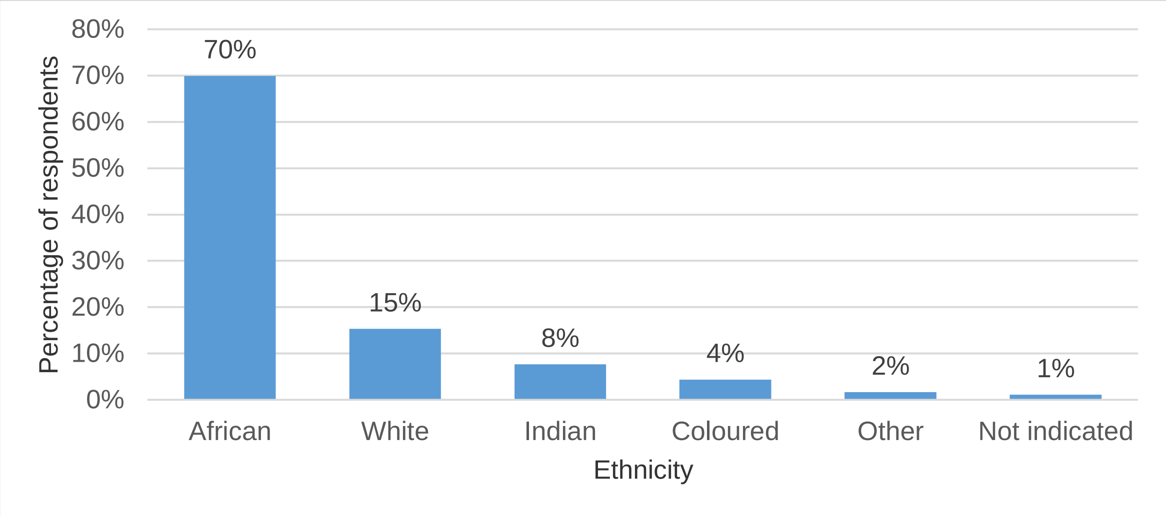

Figure 5: Ethnicity of respondents

4.3.3 *Education level of respondents*

The level of education scale indicated that the proportion of those who completed the survey demonstrated a high level of education as shown in Figure 6 as below. It can be noted that 66% of the respondents had a degree or higher as their attained highest level of education. Only 6% had Matric only.

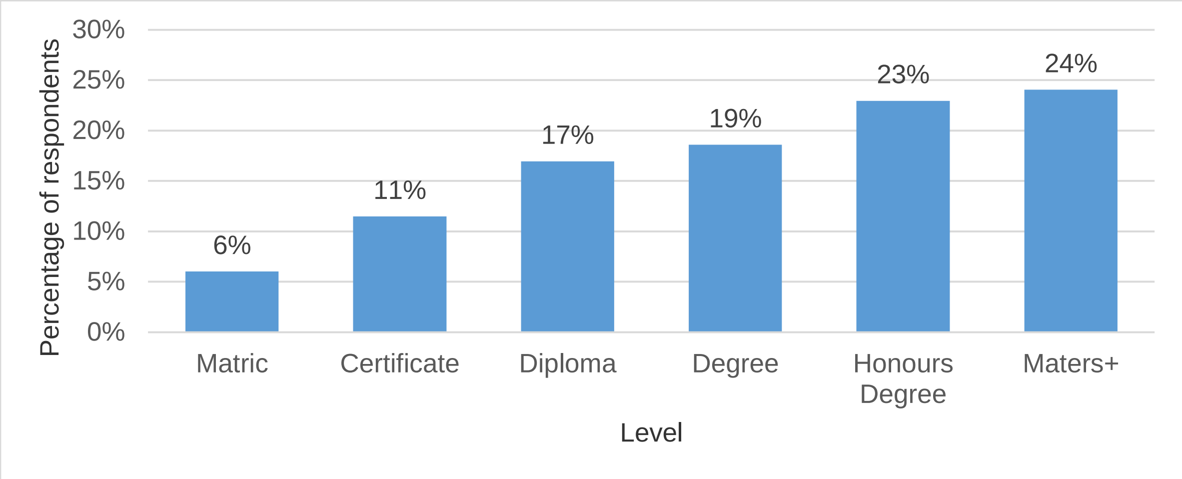

Figure 6: Level of education of respondents

4.3.4 *Business characteristics and experiences*

Table 4 summarises business-related characteristics and experiences. It can be noted that the respondents were from companies with diverse numbers of employees, with 24% coming from companies with less than 50 employees to 35% from companies with more than 1000 employees. The respondents were also across all employment levels with 27.3% being non-managerial staff, 9.3% junior managers, 18.6% middle managers, 10.4% senior managers 8.7% directors and 10.4% were executives. The highest proportion were from the Sales/Marketing/Business Developer division (28.4%).

There were a number of respondents with experience considering that 26.8% have been with their current organisation for 5 years, with 19.1% of the sample having more than 10 years.

Table 4: Business Related Characteristics

Variable	Option	Frequency	Percent
Number of Employees	Less than 50	44	24.00%
	50 – 200	46	25.10%
	200 – 500	19	10.40%
	500 – 1000	10	5.50%
	More than 1000	64	35.00%
Employee level	Employee/non managerial	50	27.30%
	Junior Manager	17	9.30%
	Middle Manager	34	18.60%
	Senior Manager	19	10.40%
	Director	16	8.70%
	Executive	19	10.40%
	Not indicated	28	15.30%
Division	Sales/Marketing/Business Developer	52	28.40%
	Operations	34	18.60%
	Consultants	17	9.30%
	Administration	15	8.20%
	Technical Support	11	6.00%
	Customer Support / Customer Services	5	2.70%
	Other	49	26.80%
Duration	2 - 12 months	23	12.60%
	1 - 5 years	76	41.50%
	5 - 10 years	49	26.80%
	10 years+	35	19.10%

4.4 Validity of the Constructs

The validity of the construct was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The analysis was conducted using IMB SPSS Amos version 21. In the process, reliability, convergent validity and divergent validity were assessed using composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and maximum shared variance (MSV) respectively. The CFA results are presented below. The Model was first fitted as initially hypothesised. Figure 7 shows the model before any changes were made.

In the model, items trst_1 through trst_6, are the observed /measured items measuring trust. While Trust is the latent variable measured by the items trst_1 through trst_6. This is also done for all the constructs, Commitment, Bonding, Customer Retention, Communication, and Relationship Satisfaction. Thus, latent variables are represented by circled. Correlations and covariance between the constructs are represented by bidirectional arrows. These show relationships without indicating the causal effect.

The one-way arrows from example from Trust to trst_1 indicates a causal effect. In other words, the observed variables trst_1 to trst_6 are caused by a latest variable/ underlying construct Trust. The variables e1 to e6 are error terms that also cause items trst_1 to trst_6. That is e1 is variance that is unique to trst_1. This means that variance in the measured items is either caused by an underlying construct in this case Trust and other variance that is unique to that item, e1, also referred to the residual or error term. The residual could be as a result of measurement error or other variables that were not measured.

The scores on the one headed arrow moving for example from trst_1 to trust shows the factor loading of trst 1 on trust (0.62 in this case). The variance is not explained by the latent variable, Trust but are due to error, e1 (0.38 in this case) on the one headed arrow from e1 to Trst_1.

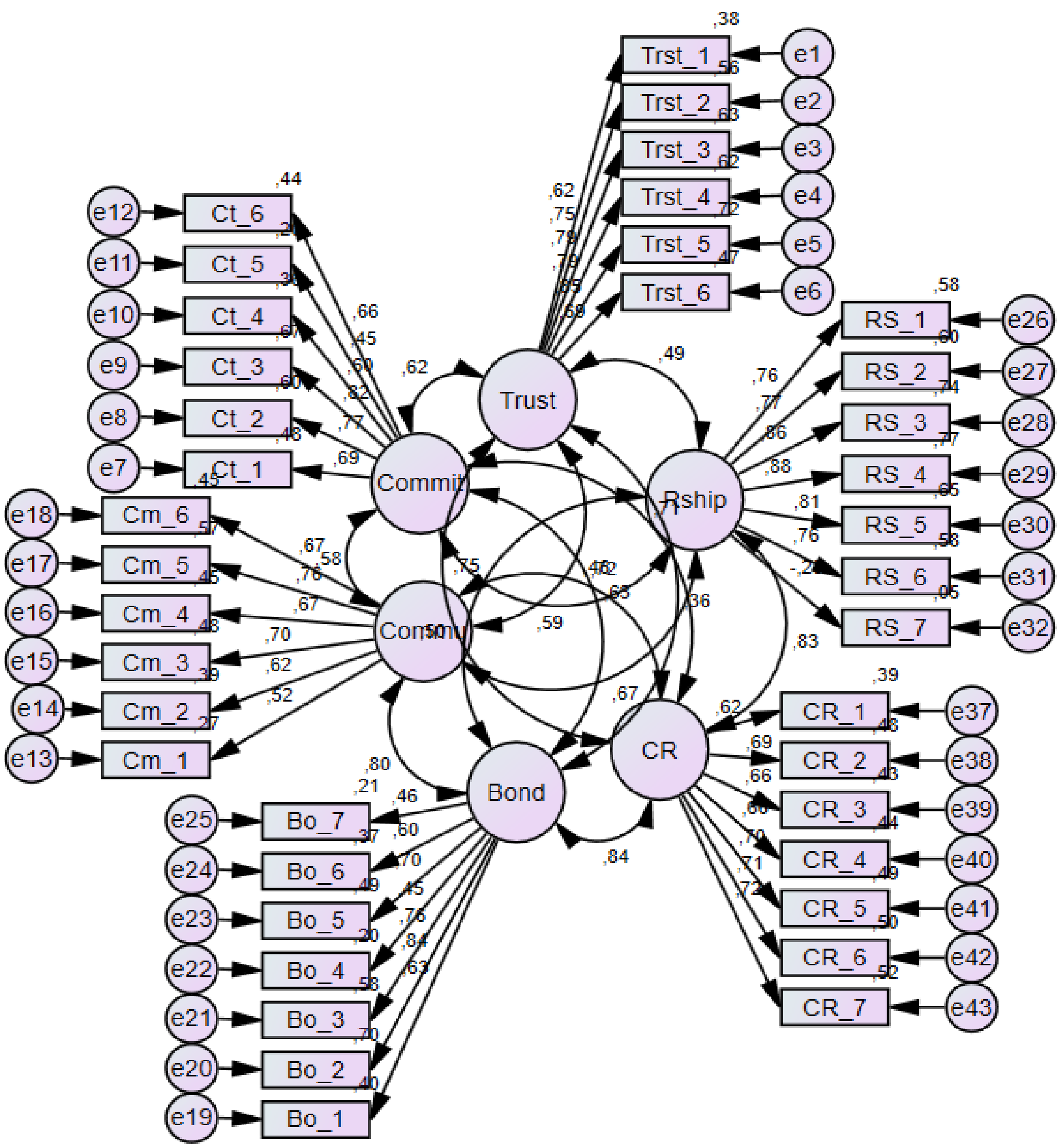

Figure 7: CFA Model before pruning

The initial CFA model as shown in Figure 7 indicated that there were a number of items that had factor loadings less than 0.4 (deemed very low - unacceptable). The items were pruned from the model to improve the quality of the model.

Table 5 below summarises the model fit indices before pruning items that did not qualify to be in the constructs.

Table 5: CFA Model Fit Indices before Pruning

Absolute Fit Indexes	**Acceptable Value**	**Value**	**Outcome**
GFI	>0.9	0.655	Below Acceptable Range
AGFI	>0.9	0.609	Below Acceptable Range
RSME	RSME<0.8	0.093	Above Acceptable Range
NFI	>0.9	0.655	Below Acceptable Range
NNFI (TLI)	>0.9	0.734	Below Acceptable Range
CFI	>0.9	0.754	Below Acceptable Range

The model fit indices were not all acceptable, the global fit index (GFI) is less than 0.90 while the Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) is above 0.08 implying that before pruning the model was a poor fit for the data in its current form. That is the reason why all the items that had a low factor loading were pruned from the model.

The model is presented in Figure 8 after pruning of items with low factor loadings. The items trst_1, RS_3, RS_7, CR_1, CR_7, BO_4, BO_6, BO_7, Cm_1, Cm_2, and Ct_1, Ct_5 were pruned from the initial model because they had low factor loadings.

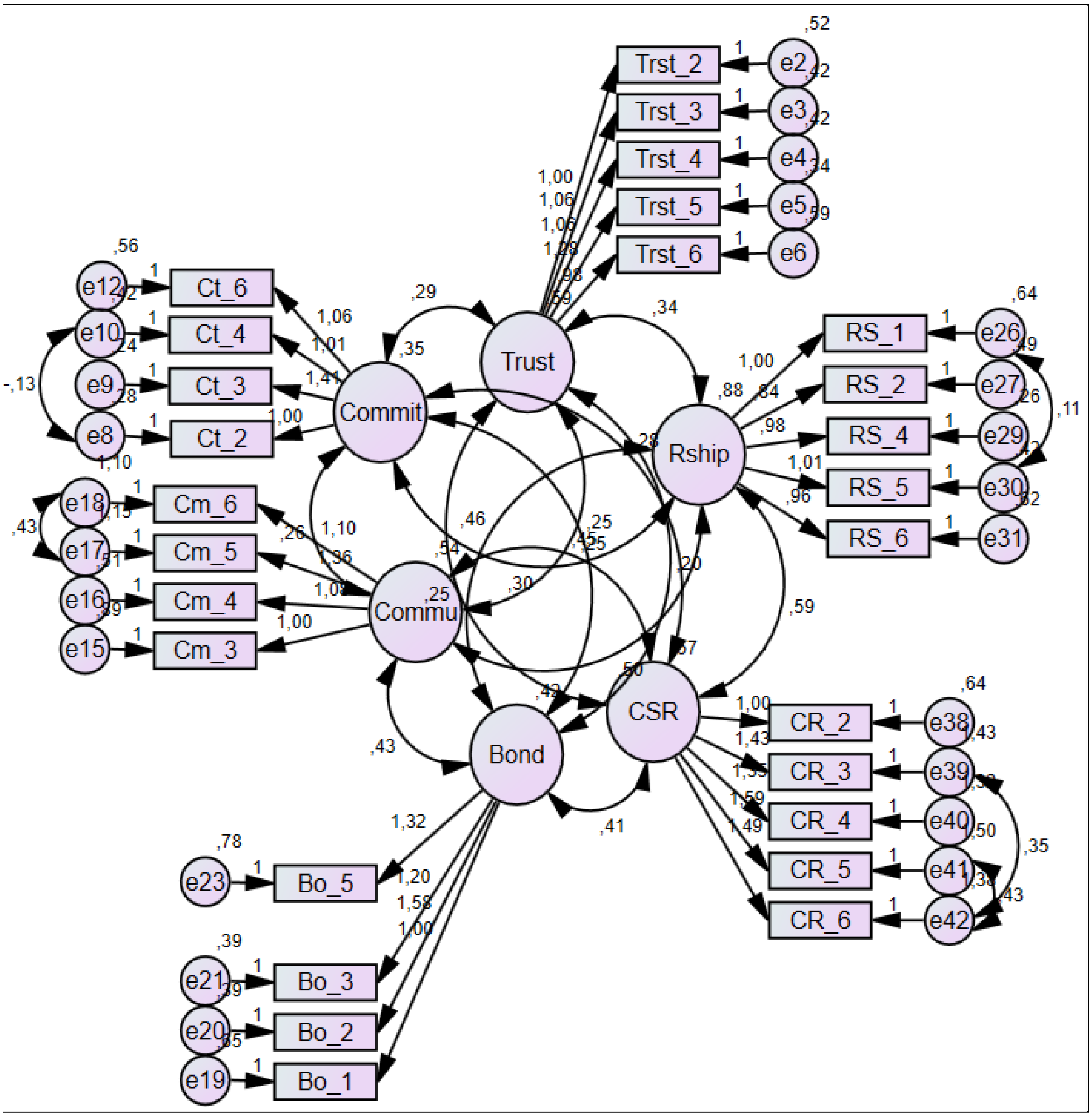

Figure 8: Final CFA Model after pruning

The items in the final CFA model had high factor loading and are presented in table 6 below:

Table 6: CFA factors

Item Code	Items	Factor Loading	CR	α
Trust			0.880	0.597
Trst_2	We do our best to keep the promise made to the customers.	0.727		
Trst_3	We are a trustworthy service provider.	0.783		
Trst_4	Ours customers can rely on us to keep our promises.	0.783		
Trst_5	We stand by our word.	0.861		
Trst_6	We have expectation that the future relationship with our customers will be good.	0.698		
Commitment			0.822	0.539
Ct_2	We intend to do business with our customers well into the future.	0.741		
Ct_3	We are dedicated to continuing doing business with our customers.	0.863		
Ct_4	Our relationship with our customers deserves our maximum effort to maintain.	0.674		
Ct_6	We are willing to put in a great deal of effort in order for our alliance with the customer to be successful.	0.64		
Communication			0.759	0.442
Cm_3	Our customers solicit our views on an ongoing basis.	0.615		
Cm_4	We have frequent interactive communication with our customers.	0.745		
Cm_5	In our relationship, our customers keep us informed of the major developments in their company.	0.681		
Cm_6	When we share our challenges with the customer, we know that they will respond with understanding.	0.61		
Bonding			0.831	0.555
Bo_1	Our companies benefit from knowledge sharing with our customers.	0.628		
Bo_2	We have invested in a personalised relationship with our customers.	0.854		
Bo_3	Our relationship is strengthened by invested effort and time.	0.782		
Bo_5	We have regular contact with our customers.	0.696		
Relationship Satisfaction			0.894	0.629
RS_1	Our company is very satisfied with the relationship with our customers.	0.762		
RS_2	Our services meet our customers' expectations.	0.746		
RS_4	The relationship between our customers and us is satisfying.	0.875		

RS_5	The relationship between our customers and us is satisfying.	0.825		
RS_6	Our customers would choose us if they are asked to select again.	0.751		
Customer Retention			0.814	0.466
CR_2	Our relationship with the customer is a long-term alliance.	0.688		
CR_3	We have a formalized procedure to cross-selling to our customers.	0.67		
CR_4	The customer is likely to return, it is almost automatic.	0.663		
CR_5	We internally actively stress customer retention or loyalty programs.	0.7		
CR_6	We have an approach to re-establish relationships with valuable customers who have been lost to competitors.	0.693		
SEM Fit Indices: x^2 = 735.042 (304); x^2/df =173.245 / 304 = 2.418; RMSE = .088; CFI = .856; TLI = .833; GIF = .781; NFI = .780				

All items that had a low factor loading were eliminated, these are Trst_1, Ct_1, Cm_1, Cm_2 and CR_1. All the items retained after pruning the CFA model loaded highly on their respective factors. The model fit indicates factors were either acceptable or slightly below the acceptable range. The results on CR, AVE, MSV and MaxR(H) are summarised in the Table 7 below.

Table 7: The summary of CFA factors

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)
Trust	0.880	0.597	0.406	0.890
Commitment	0.822	0.539	0.420	0.850
Bonding	0.831	0.555	0.805	0.854
Customer Retention	0.814	0.466	0.712	0.814
Communication	0.759	0.442	0.805	0.768
Relationship Satisfaction	0.894	0.629	0.696	0.903

It can be noted that there was acceptable reliability for all the constructs as the composite reliability (CR) values were greater than 0.7, the values are: Commitment (0.822), Bonding (0.831), Customer Retention (0.814), Communication (0.759), Relationship Satisfaction (0.894), Trust (0.880). Convergent validity was confirmed for the Commitment (AVE = 0.539), Bonding (AVE = 0.555), and Relationship Satisfaction (AVE = 0.629) as the AVE values were greater than the minimum requirement of at least 0.5. There was low convergent validity for Customer Retention (AVE = 0.466) and Communication (AVE = 0.442).

There was a problem with discriminant validity as the MSV values were greater than the AVE values for all the 6 constructs.

4.5 **Correlation**

Pearson correlation or Spearman correlation is used to explore the strength of the relationship between two continuous variables. This gives an indication of both the direction (positive or negative) and the strength of the relationship. A positive correlation indicates that as one variable increases, so does the other. A negative correlation indicates that as one variable increases, the other decreases. Correlation is often used to explore the relationship among a group of variables, rather than just two, this way all the individual correlation coefficients in are displayed. The correlation matrix is summarised on the Table 8 below.

Table 8: Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Commitment	0.734					
2.Bonding	,648	0.745				
3.Customer Retention	,626	,844	0.683			
4.Communication	,602	,897	,816	0.665		
5.Relationship Satisfaction	,541	,762	,834	,730	0.793	
6.Trust	,637	,396	,436	,439	,465	0.772

4.6 **SEM Results**

A Structural Equation model (SEM) was drawn based on the items retained from the CFA. This was done to assess the relationships among variables and to test the hypotheses. SEM is based on multiple regression and factor analytic techniques, it allows the evaluation of the importance of each of the independent variables in the model and to test the overall fit of the model to the data. The results are presented in Figure 9 below.

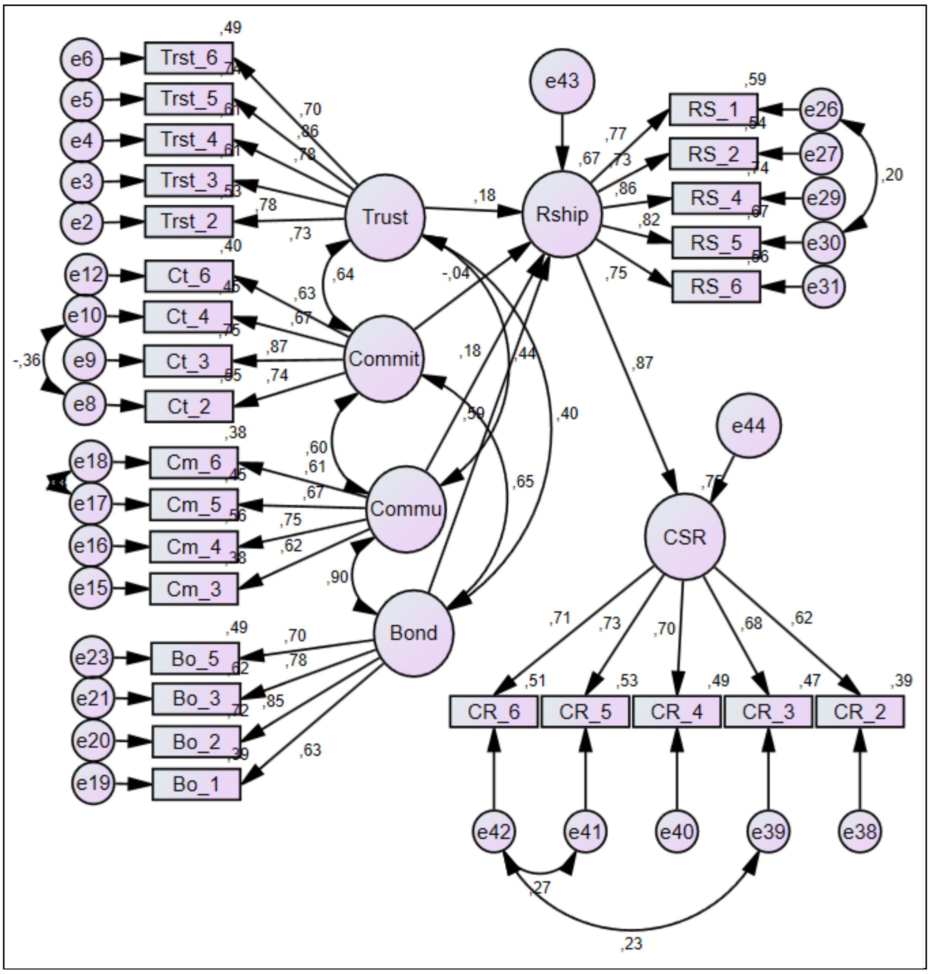

Figure 9: Structural equation model

The SEM model of standardised regression weights is presented in Table 9 below.

Table 9: SEM Model - Standardised Regression weights

Hypotheses / Path Analysis			Standardized Estimates	T-value	Hypothesis Supported
Trust	→	Customer Relationship	.185	2.127**	Yes
Commitment	→	Customer Relationship	-.043	.409 ns	No
Communication	→	Customer Relationship	.0183	.749 ns	No
Bonding	→	Customer Relationship	.587	2.289**	Yes
Customer Relationship	→	Customer Retention	.868	7.562***	Yes
SEM Fit Indices: x^2 = 757.654 (308); x^2/df =757.654 / 308 = 2.460; RMSE = .090; CFI = .849; TLI = .828; GIF = .777; NFI = .773					

Notes: **p-value < 0.05, *** Indicates that p-value < 0.001

The Squared Multiple Correlations also referred to as r-square. The Squared Multiple Correlation is the communality estimate for an indicator variable. The communality measures the percent of variance in a given indicator variable explained by its latent variable (factor) and may be interpreted as the reliability of the indicator. The data were computed for the two-dependent variable among the constructs during path analysis, and the results are shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Squared Multiple Correlations

	Estimate
Customer Relationship	,671
Customer Retention	,754

These results revealed that Trust, Commitment, Communication, and Bonding explained 67.1% of variation in Relationship Satisfaction (r-square = 0.671) while Relationship Satisfaction explained 75.4% of variation in Customer Retention (r-square= 0.754).

4.6.1 *Results Pertaining to Hypothesis 1 (H1): Trust has an impact on relationship satisfaction*

H0: There is no relationship between trust has an impact on relationship satisfaction

H1: Trust has an impact on relationship satisfaction

The results presented in Table 9 revealed that Trust (β = 0.185, t-value = 2.127, p-value < 0.05) has a positive and significant impact on relationship satisfaction. The relationship was positive because the coefficient for trust was greater than zero and was significant because the p-value was less than 0.05. This implies that the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. This implies that hypothesis H1 was **supported** and it is concluded that Trust has an impact on relationship satisfaction.

4.6.2 *Results Pertaining to Hypothesis 2 (H2): Commitment has an impact on relationship satisfaction*

H0: There is no relationship between Commitment has an impact on relationship satisfaction

H2: Commitment has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction with service.

The results shown in Table 9 indicated that Commitment (β = -0.043, t-value = -0.409, p-value > 0.05) had an insignificant relationship with relationship satisfaction. The relationship was not significant because the p-value was greater than 0.05. This implies that the null hypothesis was could not be rejected. This implies that hypothesis H2 was **not supported,** and it is concluded that there is a non-significant relationship between Commitment and relationship satisfaction.

4.6.3 *Results Pertaining to Hypothesis 3 (H3): Communication has an impact on relationship satisfaction*

H0: Communication has no impact on relationship satisfaction

H3: Communication has an impact on relationship satisfaction with the service

It can be noted from the results in Table 9 that Communication (β = 0.183, t-value = 0.749, p-value > 0.05) was non significant in predicting relationship was greater than zero. The relationship was not significant because the p-value was greater than 0.05. This implies that there was no sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. This implies that there was a non-significant relationship between communication and relationship satisfaction, and that hypothesis H3 was **not supported**.

4.6.4 *Results Pertaining to Hypothesis 4 (H4): Bonding has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction*

H0: There is no relationship between Bonding and relationship satisfaction

H4: Bonding has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction

The results in Table 9 revealed that Bonding (β = 0.587, t-value = 2.289, p-value < 0.05) has a positive and significant impact on relationship satisfaction. The relationship was positive because the coefficient for Bonding was greater than zero and was significant because the p-value was less than 0.05. This implies that the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. This implies that hypothesis H4 was **supported** and it is concluded that efforts by the company's employee to bond with the customer will result in relationship satisfaction.

4.6.5 *Results Pertaining to Hypothesis 5 (H5): There is a positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and customer retention*

H0: There is no relationship between relationship satisfaction and customer retention.

H4: There is a positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and customer retention.

Table 9 shows that Relationship Satisfaction (β = 0.868, t-value = 7.5629, p-value < 0.001) has a positive and significant impact on Customer Retention. The relationship was positive because the coefficient for Relationship Satisfaction (β =

0.868) was greater than zero and was significant because the p-value was less than 0.05. This implies that the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. This implies that hypothesis H5 was **supported**. It is concluded that relationship satisfaction has a significant positive impact on customer retention.

5 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

This chapter presents a discussion of the results shown in the preceding chapter. The discussion is presented relative to the previous research conducted and information discussed in the literature review. The interpretation of the results takes into account the results of the findings of this research.

5.1 Introduction

The findings of this study provide insights on the objectives of the research of determining the impact of relationship marketing strategy within the South African B2B services perspectives. The research served as a contribution from the emerging markets point of view. The findings provide important information that can be utilised by marketing managers of services companies on implementing a strategic relationship marketing plan, taking into account the current relationship between the company employees that are at an interface with the customer and the customer’s intention to re-purchase.

According to Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017) the key variables for relationship marketing are: trust, commitment and communication as the most influential constructs, in addition this research includes bonding as a key construct. These variables were investigated as the most influential to buyer-seller lasting relational success for B2B companies.

The research investigated the views of the important employees serving customers and currently operating in the B2B service industry. The aim was to identify the relationship between the company employees that are at an interface with the customer and the customer’s perception of the service delivered. The findings of this study also provide insights into the interrelationships between trust, commitment, communication, and bonding constructs of relationship marketing and their impact on customer retention.

The data was analysed using multiple regression analysis. The results generally indicate that while the majority of the factors are significant in their interaction with relationship satisfaction, competency and responsiveness as moderating factors did not prove statistically significant and were therefore excluded from the conceptual mode. The constructs trust and bonding have a significant positive impact on relationship satisfaction, whilst the constructs communication and commitment have a non statistically significant relationship with relationship satisfaction. The results revealed that Trust, Commitment, Communication, and Bonding explained 67.1% of the variance in Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship Satisfaction has a 75.4% correlation with Customer Retention, therefore relationship satisfaction has an impact on customer retention. The results are discussed in the following sections.

5.2 **Discussion pertaining to demographics**

The input was from a diverse range of respondents, working for companies of varying size, who have knowledge and experience of interacting with customers in the B2B services industry. The age distribution of the respondents is constituent of mature respondents, across all employment levels. The level of education of the respondents who completed the survey indicated a high level of education, with most respondents having attained a degree and higher. Of most significance is that the highest proportion of respondents, at 28.4%, are from the Sales/Marketing/Business Development departments. These respondents are highly knowledgeable with regard to buyer-seller relationships.

This correlates well with the notion that technical industry services are complex, in most cases the respondents are experts who have been in the field for a number of years. The complexity of B2B services offerings and the value of the transactions of the services requires that transactions are based on trust (Arnott et al., 2007).

5.3 **Research Objective 1 Discussion**

Research Objective 1 was to identify the determinants of the relationship between the company employees that interface with the customers and the customers' perception of the service delivered.

5.3.1 *The relationship between trust and relationship satisfaction*

According to Arnott et al. (2007), social behaviour antecedents are dominant over service offering in building trust and have direct impact to building long-term sustainable customer relationships. The results of the study indicate willingness to contribute positively to building trusting relationships by the employees that interfaces with the customer and improve the relationship quality, subsequently relationship satisfaction. The findings of this research supports this as trust is a variable that shows interrelatedness with the rest of the constructs investigated, i.e. commitment, communication and bonding.

For hypothesis 1: Trust has a positive impact on relationship satisfaction.

This hypothesis is ***supported***, there is a significant positive impact of trust and relationship satisfaction. The findings are in support of previous studies. There have been many studies that have confirmed this finding for companies operating in the developed countries such as Crosby et al. (1990); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Kramer (1999); and Anderson and Narus (1990); and from the South African context (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017). The positive outcome of the correlations has an impact on the establishment of long term relationships, it demonstrates that there is a correlation between trust and relationship satisfaction. Business managers should look into implementing practical activities that facilitate trusting relationships between the company employees and the customers, such an ensuring delivery on promises made. This will go a long way towards building lasting relationships with the customer.

5.3.2 *Commitment has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction*

In accordance with Bendapudi and Berry's (1997) study, it is the perception of the employees that interface with the customer that their commitment to the customer and personal interactivity drives the establishment of lasting relationships based on trust and mutual exchange. Many researchers identified commitment to be an antecedent in the building of trusting relationships from the perspective of companies operating in the developed world (Moorman et al., 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005).

Hypothesis 2 stated: Commitment has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction with service.

This hypothesis is ***not supported***, as there is a non-significant effect of commitment on relationship satisfaction. Previous research had shown that commitment is an essential factor of any relationship and has a major influence on the building of long-term customer-seller relationships (Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005). According to Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017), trust and commitment are the basic building blocks of the customer's positive satisfaction with the service provider and has contribution to the customer relying and trusting on the service provider's intention on working to secure a favourable future for both parties (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017).

However, there are no previous studies that related relationship satisfaction and commitment from the company employees' point of view. This study concludes that from the employees' viewpoint, commitment has a non-significant impact on relationship satisfaction with the service. As indicated by Bendapudi and Berry (1997), commitment could be calculative, formed in agreements that take cognisant of switching costs for the customer. The result of this study indicates that commitment does not operate on its own, it is best applied within a trusting environment. Business managers can establish clear directive on commitment, which the employees can practice. This must be aligned to the integrity of the company and must be communicated to the customer in the initial stages of engagement.

5.3.3 *The relationship between communication and relationship satisfaction*

Communication is a crucial antecedent of trust in that it is a medium for the company employee to share expectations and adjust for successes and failures over time (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Murphy & Sashi, 2018).

Hypothesis 3 stated: Communication has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction with service.

This hypothesis is **not supported**, as there is an insignificant evidence to support that communication has an impact on relationship satisfaction, which is not consistent with prior research. According to Arnett and Badrinarayanan (2005), relationship satisfaction with regards to communication is linked to responsiveness by the employees who interface with the customer. Dagger et al. (2009) also suggest that the strength of the relationship is increased by the frequency of the contact. Previous studies have shown a positive attitude by the customer towards more responsive suppliers, but not proven to have resulted in satisfaction with the relationship (Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Arnett & Badrinarayanan, 2005). There is no doubt, a clearly communicated message alleviate conflicts in the long run. Although communication is actioned by the employees, it might be that the employees view communication as the responsibility of the organisation and not an individual employee responsibility. Business managers could review the organisational communication strategy and ensure that the employees communicate are aware of the organisational communication strategy. They also must ensure the employees understand clearly the organisational message that is aligned to the integrity of the company reaches the customer on a regular basis.

5.3.4 *The relationship between bonding and relationship satisfaction*

There are two types of bonding identified i.e. structural and social, which have strategic and personal characteristics respectively with interdependency (Rodriquez & Wilson, 1999).

Hypothesis 4 stated: Bonding has a positive impact on the relationship satisfaction

This hypothesis is **supported**, there is a significant positive impact on relationship satisfaction as a result of the employees' efforts to bond with the customer resulting in relationship satisfaction. The findings are in support of previous studies that bonding is an essential variable of commitment to work towards a common goal (Rodriquez & Wilson, 1999). According to Gounaris and Venetis (2002), an integrated bonding strategy has an effect on trust within the relationship between the customer and the service provider, resulting in satisfaction with the relationship. Business managers should design the services offers in a way that allows practical collaboration from first engagement to the delivering of the service. This allows establishment of familiarity with each other's business in a way that contributes to the building of lasting relationships.

5.4 Research Objective 2 Discussion

Research Objective No. 2 was: To analyse competency as a moderating factor that will affect the perception of the delivery of the service.

5.4.1 *Competency as a moderating factor*

It is not only the nurturing of valuable relationships with the customer that leads business success, but also the achievement of specific targets for service delivery to meet the customers' needs and satisfy the requirements. The moderating variable competency was measured using four items whose reliability value resulted in a low score. The questions were not revised to improve the reliability score, as a result competency was excluded during the testing of the hypothesis. This research did not achieve the objective to determine competency as a moderating variable, competency was not investigated further.

According to Walter et al. (2002) the level with which the company can achieve its functional requirements influences whether the customer can trust the company. Competency is an important factor that should be investigated further.

5.4.2 *Responsiveness as a moderating factor*

There is empirical evidence linking responsiveness to trust, according to Gummerus et al. (2004) and Arnett and Badrinarayanan (2005), and the ability to respond rapidly increases perceptions of convenience and provides reassurance for the customer. If the organisation is perceived to be customer oriented, this helps with building trust.

When testing the reliability of the variable responsiveness, all six items had a high score, proving to be reliable. When testing the hypothesis, responsiveness did not reflect on the path analysis, it was therefore excluded, however responsiveness is a factor of the Communication variable. This research did not achieve the objective to determine responsiveness a moderating variable, however being a factor of the construct communication, responsiveness should be investigated further.

5.5 Research Objective 3 Discussion

Research Objective No. 3 was: To analyse the importance of marketing relationship interactions by these employees on customer retention.

5.5.1 *The impact of relationship satisfaction on customer retention*

Customer satisfaction and customer retention are critical to the profitability of the business.

According to Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017), South African corporate business management have a responsibility to develop a relational approach with the business stakeholders to improve their offer with regards to the services they provide.

Hypothesis 5 stated: There is a positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and customer retention

This hypothesis is **supported**, relationship satisfaction has a significantly positive impact on Customer retention. According to Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler (2002), relationship quality‘s key integral components are: satisfaction with the service provider’s performance, trust, and the commitment to the relationship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Service quality is subsequently an assessment of the company’s service performance by the client based on previous involvement with the company (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). The confidence of repurchasing with the service provider by the customer is an indication of satisfaction (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). For business managers to achieve relationship satisfaction with the customer, trust, commitment and bonding are influential attributes. Strengthening the satisfaction experience of the customer with the service creates a positive satisfaction experience. These is the most cost effective way for customer retention and to secure a viable and lasting customer base (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017).

5.6 **Conclusion**

The study established that B2B services companies need to understand the establishment of the relationship between the employees' who interface with the customer. There must be an effort from the employee's side to ensure relationship continuity with the customer.

Conditions in which these businesses operate are very competitive, establishment of lasting relationships with the customer is directly correlated gaining a competitive advantage from the competition. Employees overwhelmingly understand the need for a positive relationship with the client, this is a huge step already for the organisation as it works to put in place its relationship marketing strategy. The analysis of the respondents' views of the relationship marketing constructs i.e. trust, commitment, communication and bonding, confirms understanding of the basics when it comes to customer relationships, but more investigation can be done to understand their views even further.

Following the research of Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017), with focus on the employees, the study has established that a positive relationship exists between relationship satisfaction in B2B services industry and customer retention. By securing relationship satisfaction on the level of the employees that interface with the customer can secure profitable long-lasting relationships. There is an understanding within the B2B services industry that customers who become dissatisfied with the service with no attempt to resolve the disparity will result in loss of future purchases and hence income.

6 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the main findings are summarised as responses to the research objectives presented in previous chapters. The chapter will include recommendations to management, limitations of the study and make suggestions for future research.

6.2 Summary of main findings

A diverse range of respondents from the B2B services industry, who are knowledgeable and experienced in the industry contributed to the research. The level of education of the respondents is satisfactory, it proves the complexity of B2B services offerings plays a role on the decision to purchase, trust is placed on expertise.

The summary of the results are as follows:

6.3 Research Objective 1

To identify the determinants of the relationship between the company employees that interface with the customers and the customers' perception of the service delivered.

The study has proven the objective that employees who interface with the customer positively contribute to the maintaining of lasting relationship with the customer by building trust. There is a correlation between employees building trusting relationship with the customer that will result in the customer's satisfaction with the service and subsequent customer retention.

The study has not proven this objective with regards to commitment, the employee's commitment to the customer and personal interactivity has a positive impact to relationship satisfaction. There is no significant correlation between employee's commitment and relationship satisfaction with service. Although a building block of trusting relationships, commitment works best with other construct, it may be that commitment works with trust.

The study has not proven this objective with regards to communication, the employee's communication with the client does not have a significant impact on the customer relationship satisfaction. There is a non-significant correlation between employee's communication and relationship satisfaction with service. The scope of communication in these relationships is wide; it may be that communication is linked to other attributes like trust and responsiveness.

The study's objective, to determine whether the employees' efforts to establish a bond with the customer has a positive effect on the customers' satisfaction with the relationship, has resulted in a significant positive significant result. An integrated bonding strategy has an effect on trust within the relationship between the customer and the service provider, resulting in satisfaction with the relationship.

6.4 **Research Objective 2**

To determine the effectiveness of the customer-facing employees' moderating factors on the customers' perception of the service delivered.

The constructs competency and responsiveness as moderating factors did not prove statistically significant and were therefore excluded from the conceptual model. This could be that they were incorporated in other constructs rather than stand-alone moderating factors.

6.5 **Research Objective 3**

To analyse the importance of marketing relationship interactions by these employees on customer retention.

The study's objective was to determine whether relationship satisfaction has an impact on customer retention. There is positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and customer retention. Relationship satisfaction is in line with relationship quality and satisfaction with the service provider's performance is secured in trust and commitment. These are influential attributes to customer retention and reduced customer churn.

The results revealed that Trust, Commitment, Communication, and Bonding explained 67.1% of variation in Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship Satisfaction has 75.4% of variation in Customer Retention, therefore relationship satisfaction has an impact on customer retention.

6.6 **Recommendations**

The research gap of this study was to investigate customer-facing employees' perceptions of the factors impacting relationship quality and their perception of the subsequent impact on relationship quality with the customer building on the study (Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017). Following the results of the studies it is evident that the interrelatedness of the relationship variables contributes significantly to the high variation of relationship satisfaction on customer retention, there is a good case in developing satisfying relationships with the customer in B2B services companies. The implications for researchers as well as practical implications for managers are outlined as follows:

6.6.1 *Implications for Researchers*

The study contributes to the current theoretical understanding of relationship marketing by identifying the interrelatedness between the relationship constructs and the impact this has on relationship quality, from the perspective of the employees that interface with the customer.

There are many studies that focus on the significance and implication of relationship marketing (Crosby et al., 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Zolkiewski, 2017). However, these studies do not focus on determining the interrelatedness of the relationship constructs and how they work together to impact customer retention, and to identify the setting within the company at which relationship marketing strategies is being applied, with reference to customer retention, how it is measured and the value for the customer (Palmatier et al., 2006).

According to Roberts-Lombard et al. (2017), the differing relationship marketing constructs have an influence on the buyer–supplier relational success and subsequent creation of lasting relationship that contributes to the success of the organisation. It is also not often that the relationship marketing constructs of trust, commitment, communication and bonding are measured from the seller’s point of view in and from an emerging market perspective.

The key outcome of this study shows trust and bonding are significant in their interaction with relationship satisfaction whereas communication and commitment are more significant when paired with trust; further research can focus of mediating factors that can strengthen this findings. The constructs trust and bonding are the constructs with the most significant positive impact to relationship satisfaction whilst constructs communication and commitment have an insignificant relationship with relationship satisfaction, suggestion for research in B2B relationships is to assess mediating factors that affect these findings to determine their impact.

Further research can also focus on encompassing more variables like satisfaction as a variable, co-operation, continuity to expand on the current conceptual model and assess the outcome of differing relational outcomes over a wide contextual range.

6.6.2 *Practical Implications for Managers*

From a practical perspective, this research provides some relevant marketing strategies for B2B services industries that seek to develop strategic relational plans based on trust with the customer. Managers should encourage the formation of relationships between employees and customers, and support employees as maintenance of these relationships can be perceived as demanding and impacting on their productivity (Dalela, Givan, Vivek, & Banerji, 2018). This can be done through appropriate internal marketing campaigns, to reinforce the role of customer-facing employees in providing customer-centric experiences for the customers.

The identified constructs of relationship marketing: Trust, Commitment, Communication and Bonding among other relationship constructs should be emphasised within the company's marketing strategy as a key base between all parties in the establishment and management of relationships with the customers.

It is important for the business managers to understand that relationship satisfaction may be an antecedent of activities that establish trust and commitment between the company employee and the customer. Practical implication could be to emphasise those characteristics that contribute to the building of trusting relationships even before the customer has considered contacting the company employees for an enquiry to purchase.

6.7 **Limitations of the study**

As with most research studies, this study is not without limitations. In conducting this research, the sampling method was non-probabilistic, therefore the respondents used in this study might not necessarily be representative of the population.

The study focused on all company employees who interface with the client working across all levels in the company from general administration to management employees. The limitation is that some of the respondents such as those in managerial positions and such departments as Safety assurance, Human Resources and Finance may not interface with the client regularly, therefore there is a limitation with regards to their experiences with the clients.

The respondents are the employees and their perceptions about their own activities, they could be biased towards their own behaviour and their own companies. Furthermore, as with any other surveys, the information may be subject to bias as respondents are not always truthful in their responses, their responses may be a reflection of the desired conduct they wish to present.

The study analysed B2B services companies within the South African context, most of the respondents are in the technical services providers, this presents limitations in that the results cannot be generalised to the rest of the services industry in South African.

Questionnaires offer researchers valuable methods of evaluating employee views, they are limited in their ability to probe issues in an-in-depth manner such as the importance that employees attach to customer responsiveness. It would be valuable to explore the idea of face to face interviews with the industry’s key players as an exploratory study to gain insight of their views of the topic.

6.8 Suggestions for further research

Limitations are good identifiers of research opportunities. The following areas of future research are suggested that may complement the findings in this study:

There is an opportunity to expand the study to more socially oriented services marketing industries to achieve a broader range of views from diverse services companies in South Africa, such as the finance industry and hotel industry.

The respondents are the employees providing perceptions about their own activities, it would be interesting to evaluate the clients who are served by these companies of the respondents.

The research could be strengthened by expanding relationship constructs to cover other key aspects like of relationship marketing like collaboration and cooperation. This is to strengthen the understanding of a wider range of relationship constructs and for improved relational building outcomes.

A longitudinal study should be done to determine the long-term impact in the same industry after an intervention such as training of customer-interfacing employees, to determine the impact on relationship quality.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire Cover Letter

Good day,

Thank you for taking the time to complete this academic questionnaire. I am a post-graduate student at the University of the Witwatersrand – School of Business Administration, undertaking a Master of Management degree in the field of Strategic Marketing.

I am currently conducting research for my dissertation entitled: **The Impact of Relationship Marketing Strategies on Customer Retention in a Business-to-Business Services Company.**

I kindly request you to complete the survey, which should take less than 10 minutes to complete. Your response is greatly appreciated and of great value to my research.

Your participation is voluntary and you will not be asked to provide any identification information; your identity and responses will remain anonymous. This research is for academic purposes only and the information obtained is kept strictly confidential.

Your views are very important to me.

Sincerely,

Mashudu Lembede

Email: mashaum@gmail.com

Study Supervisor:

Professor Geoff Bick

Appendix B: The Research Questionnaire

Please indicate your answer by ticking **(X)** on the appropriate box. This questionnaire is strictly for research purposes only.

SECTION A: QUALIFIER QUESTION

Q1. Do you currently work for a services industry company that provides services to other companies?

Yes	No
1	2

If no is selected, survey to be terminated

Please indicate the approximate total number of employees in your company:

Less than 50	50 – 200	200 – 500	500 – 1000	more than 1000
1	2	3	4	5

SECTION B: GENERAL INFORMATION

Q1. What is your gender?

Female	Male
1	2

Q2. What is your age?

< 18 years	18-24 Years	25-34 Years	35-44 Years	44-54 Years	55+ Years
1	2	3	4	5	6

Q3. What is your ethnicity?

African	White	Indian	Coloured	Asian	Other
1	2	3	4	5	6

Q4. What is the highest level of education?

Matric	Certificate	Diploma	Degree	Honours Degree	Masters+
1	2	3	4	5	6

Q5. What is the current level of your occupation?

Employee/non managerial	Junior Manager	Middle Manager	Senior Manager	Director	Executive
1	2	3	4	5	6

Q6. In what division does your occupation categorise from the below?

Sales/Marketing/ Business Developer	Administration	Operational	Technical Support	Consultants	Customer Support/ Customer Services	Other, e.g. Research & Development; Safety, Health & Quality; IT Specialist; Finance; Auditor; etc.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q7. How long have you been employed by your current organisation?

Less than 2 months	2-12 months	1-5 years	5-10 years	10 years+
1	2	3	4	5

Questionnaire adopted from the cultural value scale (Singelis et al., 1995)

SECTION C: RELATIONSHIP MARKETING CONSTRUCTS

For each of the statements below, please indicate to what extent you agree? Please select the appropriate response:

Q1: To investigate the relationship between trust and relationship satisfaction.

Trust	Strongly disagree	Disagree	More or less disagree	Undecided	More or less agree	Agree	Strongly agree
We are fair in our negotiations with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We do our best to keep the promise made to the customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We are a trustworthy service provider.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ours customers can rely on us to keep our promises.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We stand by our word.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We have expectation that the future relationship with our customers will be good.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Trust questions adapted from (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017); (Anderson & Weitz, 1992); (Dwyer et al., 1987); (Hibbard, Kumar, & Stern, 2001); (Rodriquez & Wilson, 1999) and (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010).

Q2: To investigate the relationship between commitment and customer retention.

Commitment	Strongly disagree	Disagree	More or less disagree	Undecided	More or less agree	Agree	Strongly agree
We would like to continue our work with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We intend to do business with our customers well into the future.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We are dedicated to continuing doing business with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our relationship with our customers deserves our maximum effort to maintain.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Even if we could, we would not drop the customer because we like being associated with them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We are willing to put in a great deal of effort in order for our alliance with the customer to be successful.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Commitment questions adapted from (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017); (Kaufman et al., 2006); (Morgan & Hunt, 1994); (Rodriquez & Wilson, 1999) and (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010).

Q3: To investigate the relationship between communication and customer retention.

Communication	Strongly disagree	Disagree	More or less disagree	Undecided	More or less agree	Agree	Strongly agree
We provide our customers with information that helps guide their decisions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We provide our customers with reasons for choosing a particular action.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our customers solicit our views on an ongoing basis.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We have frequent interactive communication with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
In our relationship, our customers keep us informed of the major developments in their company.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When we share our challenges with the customer, we know that they will respond with understanding.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Communication questions adapted from (Morgan & Hunt, 1994); (Murphy & Sashi, 2018); (N. Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995) and (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010).

Q4: To investigate the relationship between bonding and customer retention.

Bonding	Strongly disagree	Disagree	More or less disagree	Undecided	More or less agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Our companies benefit from knowledge sharing with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We have invested in a personalised relationship with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our relationship is strengthened by invested effort and time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It would be costly for our customers to switch to a new relationship with our main competitors.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We have regular contact with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We maintain close personal relationships with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Some of our communication with our customers is personal.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Bonding questions adapted from (Gounaris & Venetis, 2002); (Murphy & Sashi, 2018); (Rodriquez & Wilson, 1999) and (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010).

Q5: To measure the employees' views of relationship satisfaction of the client

Relationship Satisfaction	Strongly disagree	Disagree	More or less disagree	Undecided	More or less agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Our company is very satisfied with the relationship with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our services meet our customers' expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The relationship between our customers and us is positive.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

The relationship between our customers and us is satisfying.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We are pleased with the relationship we have with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our customers would choose us if they are asked to select again.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our customers are unhappy with our business relationship.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q6: In this section, we ask some general questions about how you relate with other. Please rate you level of agreement with the following questions.

General Relationships	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**More or less disagree**	**Undecided**	**More or less agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
You like to gossip at time	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
There have been occasions when you took advantage of a situation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
You always try to practice what you preach	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
You have never been annoyed when people expressed ideas very different from your own	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q7: To measure views on customer retention

Customer Retention	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**More or less disagree**	**Undecided**	**More or less agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
We expect our relationship with the customer to continue for a long time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our relationship with the customer is a long-term alliance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We have a formalized procedure to cross-selling to our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

The customer is likely to return, it is almost automatic.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We internally actively stress customer retention or loyalty programs.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We have an approach to re-establish relationships with valuable customers who have been lost to competitors.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We attempt to build long-term relationships with our customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Customer retention questions adapted from (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2017); (Reinartz, Krafft, & Hoyer, 2004) & (N. Kumar et al., 1995).

Q8. To measure views on competency:

Competency	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**More or less disagree**	**Undecided**	**More or less agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
I have a great deal of knowledge concerning the services we offer to customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have a great deal of experience in my field concerning the services we offer to customers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We are experts in our field.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Our clients are satisfied with the level of our competency.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Adapted from (Schneider, 1998) and (Theron, Terblanche, & Boshoff, 2013).

Q9. To measure views on responsiveness to the customer:

Responsiveness	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**More or less disagree**	**Undecided**	**More or less agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
I provide a timely response on standard requests by the customer.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I provide a timely response and effective resolution to customer issues.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We provide a platform for the customer to place their order, receive their invoices timely and check on service completion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
We provide a timely quotation response on standard items.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Adapted from (Bowman & Narayandas, 2004); (Gummerus et al., 2004)